

## Minutes of the Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission

Mon., Sept. 9, 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*; Carole Perrault, Charles Redmon, *members*; SueEllen Myers, *alternate*

Commission Members absent: Lestra Litchfield, *member*; Monika Pauli, *alternate*

Staff present: Eiliesh Tuffy

Members of the Public: See attached list.

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Nancy Goodwin, Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

### Public Hearing: Alterations to Designated Properties

**MC-4331: 3 St. Paul St., by Ramya Swaminathan.** Install a 27-panel solar array on south roof slope.

The house under review is a 2-1/2 story residence along a dead end street, which runs along the South side of the church property fronting Prospect Street that is currently occupied by Christ The King Presbyterian Church. All of the properties on St. Paul Street were designed by architect C.H. McClare and constructed in 1899. While St. Paul is considered an official private way, the slope of the roof where the solar panels will be installed is visible from Prospect Street. The proposed panels would cover approximately 90% of the roof surface.

Ms. Perrault noted that in previous cases involving rooftop solar panels the applicant had created a mock-up to indicate the extent of the roof coverage as a visual aid for the Commission. Ms. Perrault brought forth a procedural question. She recalled only one other solar panel case that had come before the Commission during her tenure. She speculated that the Commission would be reviewing increasing more such cases as the technology and the need evolve. She mentioned that the aforementioned case involved a National Register listed property with a highly visible roof plane. The Commission recommended that the applicant install a mock-up as a visual aid for assessing the interface of the technology with the historic structure. Ms. Perrault asked whether mock-ups should be a standard practice in these cases.

The property owner said this project was being initiated in partnership with the city as part of a campaign to encourage solar energy. Ms. Goodwin asked if the goal was to replace the home electrical use by 100%. After discussion, it was determined that this solar array would not result in a zeroing out of the house's electrical consumption, the property owner works as a renewable energy developer, and this project is equally important for philosophical reasons as well as economic.

The panels themselves are 3" thick and, once installed, would sit 12" off the roof surface. Ms. Myers asked if the panels would create a glare. The contractor said they would not, and that the panels pass FAA standards for reduced glare.

Staff showed additional photos of the property, as viewed from Prospect Street, and from in front of the Presbyterian Church where the rear portion of the St. Paul St. property is visible. When asked if the array could be reduced in size to either set the panels back further from either the front edge of the roof or the rear portion to reduce the visibility from Prospect Street, the contractor said it could not be decreased in size without reducing the production of total solar energy. Ms. Myers referred to the earlier statement that this project was not meant to replace 100% of the house's total energy consumption and asked at what point the solar arrays would capture enough energy to contribute back into the electrical grid. The owner reiterated that the project is mostly philosophical to support this form of energy production.

Ms. Perrault asked if these types of solar arrays had been installed on historic houses in Cambridge and whether addresses for such installations could be provided to the Commission. The contractor said yes, they have been installed on older homes and they do structural calculations to assure the roof is adequately reinforced to support the weight of the array.

Mr. Redmon made a motion to approve the application with the recommendation that the panels currently out of alignment along the bottom edge of the array be rearranged to create a clean rectangular shape that is less distracting visually and would draw less attention to the irregular shape on the roof. Mr. Hsiao seconded the motion, which passed 5-0.

**MC-4333: 34 Roberts Rd., by Martha and Edward Sennott.** Add roof dormer to left slope of roof.

The house where the proposed alteration would occur is one of three adjacent buildings on Roberts Road which were developed by James E. Brown in 1894. Minor alterations have already been made to the two other houses in the grouping. The house at #34 retains much of its original integrity on the exterior, but has had vinyl windows installed throughout the building. The dormer would measure approximately 8' tall by 10' in length and would have one small window placed high on the exterior wall.

Ms. Goodwin asked if there was a privacy issue caused by the proximity of the adjacent building that called for the window as drawn in the plan. The owners explained that this dormer was going to add a much-needed bathroom to the top floor of the home, where the master bedroom is located. Members of the Commission were in support of the proposal, but asked whether traditional double-hung windows could be used instead of the smaller window, which is incongruous with the rest of the fenestration on the house. The owners said they would prefer double hung windows, and agreed that perhaps the layout of the bath interior could be shifted to accommodate larger windows on that outer wall and allow for additional natural light.

There were no questions or comments from the public.

Mr. Hsiao noticed that the roof overhang, as drawn in the plan, looked a little too large and they may want to reduce that dimension so it is more in keeping with a traditional shed dormer. Ms. Goodwin suggested a revised drawing could be submitted to staff for final advisement prior to the issue of a building permit.

Mr. Redmon made a motion to accept the application to construct a shed dormer with the following suggestions for modifications to the design:

- Consider rearranging the interior bathroom equipment to allow for either one or a pair of double-hung windows on the exterior wall.
- Line up the new windows with the existing windows below on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.
- Minimize the roof overhang on the shed dormer.

Mr. Hsiao seconded the motion, which passed 5-0.

**MC-4334: 6 Myrtle Ave., by Alberto Pierotti.** Add roof dormer additions (right and rear) w/rear Juliet balcony.

The residence at 6 Myrtle Ave. was originally constructed between 1892-93. The goal of the project was to create additional living space in the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor attic space under the hip roof. Right now there is a pull-down ladder stair to access the attic space. The project would eliminate the chimneys, extend the existing staircase towards the front of the house up another flight to the third floor. In order to create enough headroom, a side dormer would be added to the right side of the hip roof. Additional natural light would be brought into the third floor by creating a rear dormer with French doors, a Juliet balcony and added window glazing.

The architect presented revised drawings to the Commission at the time of the hearing, which was a change from those initially submitted as part of their review packets. Rear yard setback requirements dictate how far back on the roof a new dormer could be located. The drawings submitted at the hearing showed a hip-roofed rear dormer with a ridge height that falls below the main roofline of the house. The back of the dormer facing the rear abutter was designed with narrow French doors and a Juliet balcony. The side dormer towards the front of the house would accommodate the extended main staircase up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. In addition to the roof dormers, some window alterations were also proposed. The existing kitchen windows towards the back of the right side would be replaced and former window openings on the rear elevation would be re-opened based on framing evidence found during the interior demolition work.

An historic photograph of the building would serve as a guide in the restoration of the front porch. The clients would like to strip off the existing 7" aluminum siding, but that would be part of a later phase in the rehabilitation of the property.

Ms. Goodwin asked if the current application included a request to install replacement windows throughout the building. The owner said the only windows under discussion at this time were the replacement kitchen windows and the new windows on the rear elevation.

Ms. Perrault asked if their intent was to preserve the 2-over-2 wood windows. The owner said they would maintain the glazing pattern in either a wood or aluminum-clad window eventually. Staff inquired about the material and condition of the existing kitchen windows which are proposed to be replaced. The owner said they were more contemporary wood windows and they had suffered considerable deterioration and rot. Staff used those windows as an example of how the quality of wood windows available now cannot compare to the durability and lengthy lifespan of the 120-year-old, old-growth wood windows that still remain on the building and in much better condition than the later replacements.

Ms. Perrault asked how long the applicants had owned the property. They said they purchased the property July 1<sup>st</sup>, but currently live in the same general area of the neighborhood.

Questions and comments were received from the public.

Margaret McMahon of 14 Highland Avenue said she understood the reasoning for the proposed changes to the roofline but, at the same time, she felt the existing house looks sort of chunky and perfect in its own way which she felt was utterly charming.

The owner said she felt the house presented more of a vertical feeling in its design. Ms. Perrault noted that the existing chimneys contribute to that verticality and that, by tearing them down, they would be losing that artifact. She further commented that chimneys are becoming an increasingly threatened feature throughout the district, as interior renovations are making them obsolete. The architect said that he was surprised to see there were two chimneys in the house, neither of which served interior fireplaces. Ms. Goodwin asked how the property was heated and the owner said there was already a high efficiency boiler in the building. When asked whether the chimneys could be preserved, the architect said the front chimney would be right at the top of the stairs once extended up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor attic space.

Mr. Hsiao complimented the applicants on an admirable job explaining the intention of the project. He thought the applicant could take cues from the existing front dormer on the house, perhaps adding a similar style, single-window dormer to the remaining 3 sides of the hip roof instead – recognizing that the stair bump-out is somewhat the exception. He felt making a smaller move on all 4 sides could better maintain the roof intact. The architect said he had looked into adding another dormer on the left slope of the roof, but it would have triggered side yard setback limitations and required zoning relief.

Ms. Perrault complimented the team on the newly submitted revised drawings, saying they were a vast improvement compared to the initial submission, which didn't preserve the character of the hip roof at all.

She said it's too bad the project has to happen, but that she understood the need for the added living space and was glad the new design was preserving the original lines of the roof.

Ms. Perrault also commented that, once the applicants get to the full exterior renovation phase of the work, that they consider ~~maintaining-installing--as shown in the historic photograph that accompanied the Commissioners' package--~~ the exterior shutters and seek out a historic paint consultation from the staff of the Historical Commission.

Mr. Hsiao made a motion to accept the application as submitted, adding that it was the hope of the Commission that the owners complete the full exterior restoration as outlined. Mr. Redmon seconded the motion, which passed 5-0.

#### Determination of Procedure: Alterations to Designated Properties

**MC-4338: 1 Irving Terrace, by Tze Lei Poo & Joseph Blitzstein.** Alter balcony railing design, original window sashes and replace flat exterior panels with clapboard infill.

This townhouse is an end unit in a row of contiguous attached residences that were designed in 1974 by the architecture firm Unihab. #1 Irving Terrace abuts Irving Street, making all three elevations of this end unit publicly visible. The style of architecture is very typical of the era, with simplified forms and geometric detailing. The ornament on the townhouses, which are primarily clad in cedar clapboard, is limited to wide trim boards which frame flat exterior panels in locations framing the window and door openings. The flat panels were painted in ~~one-a distinct~~ uniform color ~~on each of the separate~~ per townhouse units, which helps differentiate one townhouse from another along the row. A horizontal railing on the top floor is proposed to be replaced with a different design that is safer in its design and less likely to be climbed up like a ladder ~~by children~~. The windows are primarily rectangular casement windows, with the exception of two large, square sashes on the front elevation which slide horizontally. These 2 large sashes are proposed to be replaced with replacement windows in a 3-sash configuration which would alter the original geometry of the fenestration.

The applicants recently purchased the property and are in the process of a full rehabilitation of their unit. Proposed changes to the original exterior design include removing the ornamental flat panels and replacing those areas within the wide trim with cedar clapboard to match the rest of the exterior siding. The applicant hopes to achieve a more uniform appearance and to use an exterior siding material that is more durable than the plywood that was originally used for the flat paneled areas.

Prior to the meeting, staff had advised the applicants and their contractors to investigate alternate materials for the flat panels that would stand up to exterior weathering conditions better than plywood. The team had priced out Azek as a potential material, but found the high cost and purported 10-year life span to be an undesirable option.

Ms. Perrault asked if the applicants had considered installing a secondary barrier such as plexiglass on the top floor, behind the original horizontal railing. The contractor said the existing railing is too short to meet current code and the owners want to change the design.

Ms. Perrault asked the applicants why they bought this particular house and what attracted them to this house. The owner said they liked the location and convenience of the property, since it is close to her husband's place of work. Mr. Blitzstein said that he is a mathematician, which gives him an appreciation for the geometric principles behind the architects' original design. They do, however, hope to complete the work quickly so that they may move in soon. The plywood panels have proven to suffer from deterioration and rot and the safety of the top floor railing is their 1<sup>st</sup> priority. They want to use more durable materials in their improvements.

Ms. Goodwin looked at the photographs of the adjacent units, and the variety of replacement railings that had been installed that differ from the original, wide horizontal board design. She noted that building code has switched back and forth on the issue of whether horizontal railings are allowable or not and she believed the current code allows horizontal railings under certain parameters.

In regard to the flat exterior panels, the applicant made the case that they would be maintaining the same boxy look of the exterior by keeping the wide trim boards in place. The applicant liked the idea of create more uniformity on the exterior by consistently using clapboards throughout. Ms. Goodwin asked if they had looked into using flat sheets of HardiPanel, stating that these flat areas on the façade were a very important element of the design during this time. Ms. Perrault added that there are many people who love and respect this era of architecture and agreed the façade detailing was very important. She likened the geometry of the façade to that found in a Mondrian painting. Mr. Redmon agreed with that observation, pointing out the color punctuations across the length of the townhouse facades.

Mr. Hsiao said the Commission does not get this type of building before them often. He said the ornamental elements on this style of building are just as important as other periods of architecture. Those elements consist of the punctuation of bright colors through the use of panelization. The fact that the applicants are in an end unit gives this property that much greater visibility, which warrants more care with any exterior renovations.

- He felt the applicants could explore attaching a clear railing system behind the existing top floor railing style that is transparent but safe.
- The plywood panels could be replaced with a contemporary material that is currently available. He mentioned that HardiPanels are available with an integral color baked in to the material to reduce maintenance. He and the other Commission members felt that in this case the color of the panels was a contributing element of the overall architecture that should be retained on the new panels.

Mr. Redmon thought Mr. Hsiao was well-stated in his comments and agreed with his assessment. Ms. Perrault mentioned that an element of this work has to do with resale down the road and maintaining a consistency to the original architecture. Mr. Redmon agreed that future buyers could look at the clapboard infill as a negative if the original features of the building are not retained.

Ms. Goodwin said she would not approve the proposed alterations as she felt it ruins an original architectural feature and weakens the integrity of the property. Infilling the flat panel areas with horizontal clapboards was viewed as defeating the purpose of the intentional wide trim boards that frame those areas.

The top floor railing, if a clear back-up system could not be resolved, was seen as replaceable in order to meet safety codes but it was the recommendation of the Commission to retain the same paint color on the new railing design to be consistent with the color of the flat panels on the façade.

In discussions about the large square window sashes, the Commission felt that these could be replaced since the project team was having difficulty finding new windows to span the 94” rough opening. In the selection of the 3-panel replacement sashes, the Commission suggested maintaining a logical geometry to the façade by aligning the top floor vertical railing supports with the window mullions of the new 3-sash replacement windows to create some continuity in the exterior geometry.

The deep red accent coloring was seen to be integral to the overall building-townhouse design and encouraged to be replaced in kind.

Questions and comments were received from the public.

Ms. McMahan of 14 Highland Avenue agreed that the shade of red did not seem too loud, and that if the color was lost from the façade it would be boring.

Mr. Redmon made a motion to approve replacement HardiPanels of the same color as the existing red-painted plywood and a new top-floor railing system design that related to the vertical mullions of the replacement windows installed below it. The motion was seconded by Ms. Myers, which passed 5-0.

### Minutes

Commission members delayed approval of the minutes from the two public hearing in July to allow further time for their review. These minutes will be addressed at the October meeting of the Commission for final approval.

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

Respectfully submitted,

Eiliesh Tuffy  
Preservation Administrator

**Members of the Public who signed the attendance sheet, September 9, 2013**

Joseph Blitzstein	1 Irving Terrace, Cambridge, MA 02138
Andressa Teixeira	1 Irving Terrace, Cambridge, MA 02138
Lei Poo	1 Irving Terrace, Cambridge, MA 02138
A. Teixeira	1 Irving Terrace, Cambridge, MA 02138
Margaret McMahon	14 Highland Ave., Cambridge, MA 02139
Alberto Pierotti	6 Myrtle Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138
Tia Chapman	6 Myrtle Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138
Ed Sennott	34 Roberts Rd., Cambridge, MA 02138
Martha Sennott	34 Roberts Rd., Cambridge, MA 02138