



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: July 6, 2021

Re: Special Permit **PB #380, 48 Pearl Street**

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Community Development

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Overview

Submission Type: Special Permit Application

Applicant: Jonathan Miller

Zoning District(s): Residence C-2A (C-2A); Central Square Overlay District

Proposal Summary: Renovate an existing single-family dwelling unit.

Special Permits Requested: 20.304.2.2(a) – Additional building height; Section 20.304.4.1
– Waiver of yard setback requirements; and Section
20.304.4.2 – Reduction of required open space.

NOTE: The special permit sought for additional height is not applicable to this case; see Zoning Report for details. A summary of the applicable special permit findings is listed on the following page. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Other City Permits Needed: None

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report; Central Square Advisory Committee Report

Other Staff Reports: N/A

Requested Special Permits	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Standards for Issuance of Special Permits (Section 20.305)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed development is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Central Square Action Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ encourage responsible and orderly development; ○ strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods; ○ preserve the Square’s cultural diversity; ○ create active people oriented spaces; ○ improve the physical, and visual environment; ○ provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods. • Building and site designs are consistent with “Urban Design Plan for Central Square” as outlined in the “Central Square Action Plan” and the “Central Square Development Guidelines” (see summary on following pages). • Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity. • No National Register or contributing building is demolished or so altered as to terminate or preclude its designation (either now or within the past 5 years).
Central Square Overlay District: Building height up to 80 feet (Sections 20.304.2)	<i>The maximum height of buildings shall be 45 feet in Residence C-2A base district and additional height cannot be granted by this special permit.</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Waiver of yard setback requirements (Section 20.304.4.1)	<i>Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Reduction of open space requirements (Sections 20.304.4.2)	<i>Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i>
General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)	Special permits will be normally granted if the zoning requirements are met, unless it is found not to be in the public interest due to one of the criteria enumerated in Section 10.43.



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Zoning Report: **PB #380, 48 Pearl Street**

Area Planning and Zoning

Site Context

This site is located two blocks south of Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square (see Figure 1). It is in a transition area between the mainly commercial uses north on Massachusetts Avenue and the residential neighborhood of Cambridgeport. The building is sited across Pearl Street from the Central Square branch of the Cambridge Public Library. It is located at the corner of Pearl Street and Franklin Street, at the end of a row of attached brick and wood frame residential buildings. The property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a contributing building per section 20.303.3 of the Zoning Ordinance.



Figure 1. Aerial photograph of the area surrounding 48 Pearl Street. (Source: Nearmap, March 27, 2021)

Site Zoning

The base zoning for the site is Residence C-2A, which allows multi-family dwellings in addition to single-family and two-family dwellings, as well as some institutional uses. Most types of commercial land uses, such as offices, laboratories, and retail business, are not allowed in the Residence C-2A district. The site is also in the Central Square Overlay District (CSOD), which modifies the base zoning and also requires

review of special permits by the Central Square Advisory Committee (CSAC), whose report is attached to this memo. Some CSOD provisions that are relevant to this proposal are noted below:

Building Height Limitations: Section 20.304.2 of the Zoning Ordinance sets the maximum height of buildings to 55', with some exceptions for specific areas. For Residence C-2A, this section sets the maximum height to 45'. If the base zoning district sets a more restrictive height limitation, then that more restrictive limitation applies.

Setback and Open Space Requirements: Section 20.304.4 allows the yard requirements in Section 5.30 to be waived by a Planning Board special permit, with some exceptions and conditions. Under this section, the Planning Board may also grant a special permit to allow less Open Space than required in the base zoning.

Area Plans and Studies

The Central Square Overlay District (CSOD) was created in 1989, following a planning study that established development goals and guidelines for the area. The CSOD is identified as an "Area of Special Planning Concern," where development is subject to additional scrutiny. The zoning for CSOD was most recently amended in 2017, following the Kendall Square Central Square Planning Study (K2C2). In granting a special permit for a project in the CSOD, the Planning Board is required to follow Section 20.305 Standards for Issuance of Special Permits, which ensures that the objectives of the [Central Square Action Plan](#) and the [Central Square Development Guidelines](#) are met, and that no National Register-listed buildings are altered so that they would lose their designation.

Comments on Proposal

Project Description

The applicant proposes to renovate an existing, single-family, row-house by expanding the existing connector between the main building and the garage towards Franklin Street. This expansion would also allow access to the basement, first floor, and garage from the connector structure. The applicant also proposes to replace the existing roof deck head-house with a new, slightly taller head-house in order to construct a safer access stair. No changes to the roof deck are proposed and the replacement head-house will be in a similar location to the existing one.

Consistency with Planning and Zoning

The gross floor area (GFA) of the site will actually decrease by two square feet, so both the GFA and the floor-area ratio (FAR) will remain below the maximum allowed in the district. There are no changes to the number of parking spaces, nor to the arrangement of parking on-site. Similarly, the number of dwelling units will not increase.

The height of the existing stair head-house to access the roof deck, which is considered part of the height of the building, is 47.1 feet above grade and the proposed new head-house is 48.2 feet above grade, so the building height will increase by 1.1'. In the Residence C-2A district, the Planning Board cannot grant a special permit for building heights above 45 feet per Section 20.304.2. A determination from the Inspectional Services Department will be needed to determine if this change will require a

variance or if it can be approved as a change to an pre-existing non-conforming condition by special permit, and the Applicant will need to apply for the appropriate relief.

The existing setbacks are all nonconforming with respect to base zoning. The amount of open space on the lot is also nonconforming with respect to base zoning, and the total amount will decrease to be 0.2% less than what currently exists. The Planning Board may grant a special permit to reduce setback and open space requirements if it results in development that is consistent with planning goals and objectives for Central Square. Section 20.304.4 notes that the Planning Board should take into account the width of the adjacent public sidewalk when deciding to grant a special permit to allow a reduction in setbacks. The applicant notes that the sidewalks on both Pearl Street and Franklin Street are approximately 7' wide.

Often when a project seeks a special permit from the Planning Board under the Central Square Overlay District, it is for more substantial development. In this case, the proposal is an alteration to an existing residential building that will not change the overall use and development on the site. While the proposed scope of work will increase the nonconformity of the lot regarding building height, setbacks, and open space, it will not do so substantially relative to the current conditions.



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Urban Design Report: **PB #380, 48 Pearl Street**

Urban Design Comments

The proposed minor alterations and additions are barely perceptible on the street-facing elevations and therefore pose no impact on public realm. The line-of-sight studies for the headhouse proposal clearly show a well-recessed and unobtrusive visual presence from the opposite side of both Franklin and Pearl Streets.

The form of the proposed headhouse appears to be more visually complementary to the mansard roof of the original building. The window and clapboard siding on the west face appear are a good fit with the building's existing character.

Continuing Review

The following are additional recommendations for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Details, materials, and colors of all architectural elements.