
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

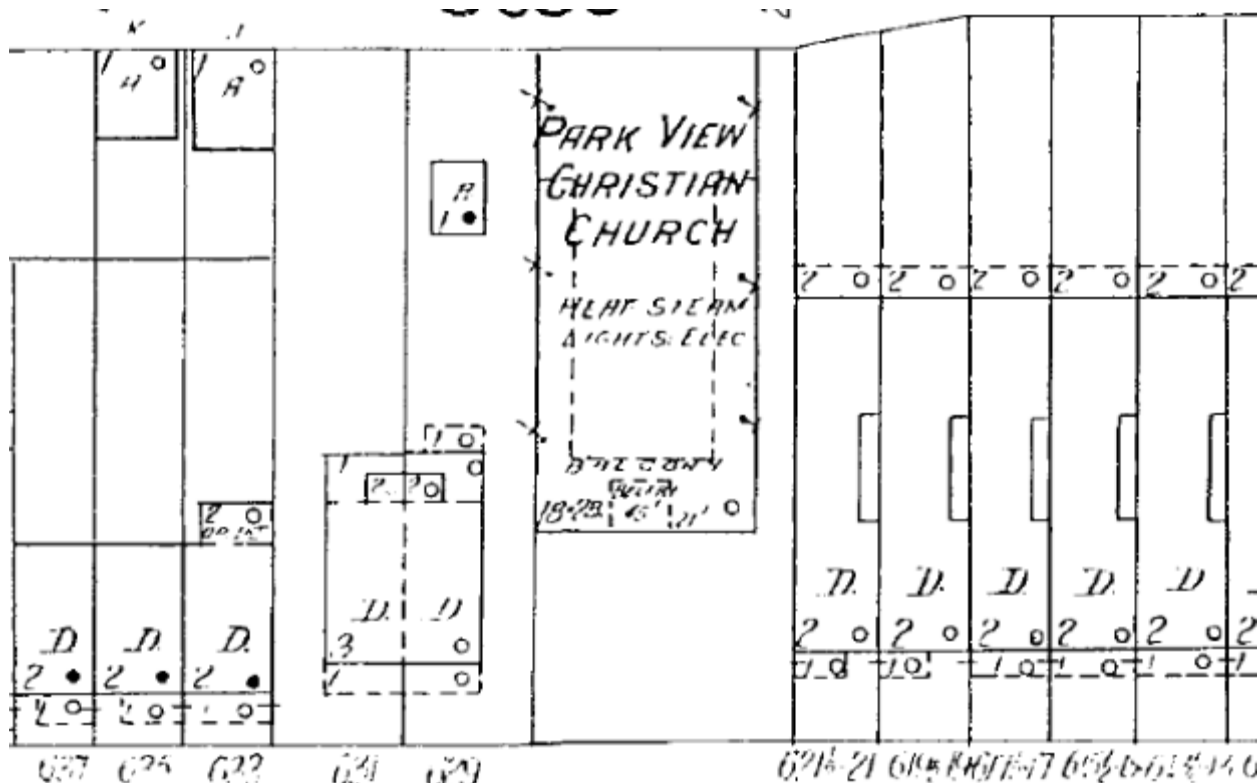
Landmark/District:	Park View Christian Church	(x) Agenda
Address:	625-631 Park Road NW	
Meeting Date:	July 24, 2014	(x) Alteration
Case Number:	14-510	
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennée	(x) Concept

The applicant, property owner 633 Park, Inc. (Mubashir Khan), with Arcadia Design (James Foster), requests the Board's review of a concept to construct a three-and-a-half-story, multi-family building as an addition to the recently landmarked Park View Christian Church. The new construction would stand next to—but about twelve feet from—the church, attached only by a small hyphen at the very rear of the lot. The addition would replace the existing parking lot.



The Board will recall that the church, landmarked in June, was completed in 1920 in its present form. It was set well back from the street because it was constructed behind an 1877 chapel that was demolished only after the church was finished.

The church's original lot was only fifty feet wide, and that is the extent of the landmark designation. Yet, more than two decades ago, that older lot was consolidated with a couple of residential lots to the west and is now part of the larger subject property, Lot 97. The Board must review for compatibility any construction that would extend into the parcel that has been designated historic. Thus, even a minimal connection, such as proposed, draws the whole into the Board's jurisdiction.



A 1928 Sanborn insurance map showing the church and surrounding properties.

Evaluation

The legal standard for recommending approval of an addition is that the addition be found to be compatible with the character of the landmark. Yet, the Board has often reviewed and supported projects that, while technically additions, were designed and used in such a way that, aside from some physical connection, they appear to be distinct buildings, only incidentally standing next door to the historic property. In such instances, the Board has effectively applied a less rigorous standard of compatibility, being concerned to make sure that the new construction does not overwhelm or overshadow the old and that the means of connection are not deleterious to the character or fabric of the historic building, as well as taking other points of compatibility into consideration.

In the present case, if the old fifty-foot-wide church lot remained, any construction next door to that lot would not require Board review. The construction does set off twelve feet from the church, which is more distance than the church had relative to its original side lot line and roughly the same distance that once separated the church from little semidetached houses next door. This space allows the west side of the building to stand free and be viewed and maintained.

If this were a historic district, the staff would not support the project as proposed, because it overwhelms the modest rowhouses adjacent, not only in height and overall depth, but also because the building's front wall is well forward of theirs, and large bays project yet further. Prominent basement windows in the projections and the lack of a front entrance would typically be problematic for compatibility with a rowhouse neighborhood. But the question here is not the relationship to surrounding properties that are *not* designated, but rather to the landmark church alone.

It is true that the new construction is taller than the church, but not in a way that overwhelms the landmark building, as the latter is powerful enough in form to stand up to it. The new building's upper half-story or "mezzanine" is also set back from the church's direction. The church suffers some from its deep setback on the site, but that was bound to be the case in any redevelopment scenario. It is the retention of the church and its character that should be the aim, and that aim is sufficiently met here, if its exterior remains little altered and seen in the round. It is not entirely clear that the insertion of fifteen small units into the church will be possible without adverse alterations to the interior, but such changes are not presently proposed. If they are proposed in the future, reworking of the interior plan could be necessary. Other exterior alterations, such as compatible window replacements, are expected.

Requested zoning relief

This concept is pretty schematic with regard to details and materials of the proposed building and landscape. But it is worth getting the Board's initial read on the overall approach, to identify any obvious incompatibility issues before the project goes to the Board of Zoning Adjustment, a process that takes a few months. If the BZA review were to take place first, substantial changes requested by the HPRB would necessitate a return of the project to the BZA.

The property and its surroundings are zoned R-4, which means that "by-right" residential uses include one- and two-family dwellings. The applicant seeks a use variance to permit apartments, asserting that the church cannot easily be converted to one- or two-family use. It remains to be seen whether such an argument can extend to the construction of an addition that is significantly larger and contains more units than the church (and whether that addition need not observe the typical rear-yard setback requirement despite its bulk).

As zoning relief is necessary for the project,¹ it seems appropriate for the Board to take an initial look at the project, but to expend no further time on design development unless and until such zoning relief is secured.

Recommendation

As the only exterior alteration to the landmark is the connection at the northwest corner, the staff recommends that the Board approve the concept's site plan, height and general massing as compatible with the character of the landmark and defer further review until the project has received zoning approvals. This recommendation should not be construed as official or informal endorsement of zoning relief.

¹ A likely alternative to an apartment building addition would be subdivision into several lots with rowhouses.