
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	Mount Vernon Square	☒ Agenda
Address:	1220-1234 4 th Street, NW	☐ Consent
Meeting Date:	April 28, 2005	☒ New Construction
Case Number:	05-152	☐ Addition
Date Received:	January 19, 2005	☐ Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennée	☒ Concept

The applicant, owner North Capital Neighborhood Development, Inc. (Todd Collins) with Zahn Design Architects, requests the Board's conceptual review of a proposal to construct seven rowhouse-type buildings on a parcel that is vacant except for a single, two-story, brick rowhouse at 1230 4th Street. There would be an addition to the rear of the existing historic rowhouse (but none atop it).

The proposed buildings would stand on narrow lots, some little more than sixteen feet wide, an issue which requires zoning relief but is not necessarily troubling from a preservation point of view. In fact, maintaining the historic lot widths is preferable for maintaining the rhythm of a streetscape of modest rowhouses, as long as the heights of any proposed buildings are not so great as to create a disproportionately attenuated appearance as a consequence. The applicant has avoided a second, more serious zoning issue by reducing the number of units in each building to the two allowed by right (contrary to what the attached plans still suggest). The fact that there were seven additional 1860s-1870s houses on this site suggests that there are likely to be extant historic archaeological resources—foundations, possible wells, privies, outbuildings and/or trash middens. The applicant may consider conducting some archaeological investigation of the site.

The proposed buildings would each stand three stories, but with the top story set back either fourteen feet or eighteen feet—with the exception of the corner building, #1220, which would have a full-depth third floor—in order to screen the setback story. The setbacks would consist of very low-pitched roofs in front, pierced with skylights, that presumably would not be visible from the street over the proposed parapets. The houses would sit on rather elevated basements and have shallow areaways, but ones not unlike those of the adjacent historic buildings. All of the new houses would have projecting bays of one or two stories.

The present immediate context for this property is of modest dwellings of only two stories. That is true of the buildings across 4th Street, nearly all of Ridge Street, the remaining building on the subject parcel, and the two houses immediately to the north. There are, however, three-story buildings farther south on the west side of 4th and also all along the 400 block of A Street, as well as at the southwest corner of N and 4th. And research of historic Sanborn insurance maps

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indicates that, of the eight houses formerly standing on this parcel, half were actually of three stories. And half—the same four—had projecting bays on their facades. This certainly demonstrates a historic precedent for taller houses at this site. The original corner building, a store and residence, stood only two stories, but the corner is probably the best location for more bulk, because the intersection provides more space around the lot and because the top floor there could screen side and oblique views of the adjacent upper stories. Ideally, there would be less height at the north end of the parcel, between the extant two-story building on the site and two two-story houses just beyond the parcel boundary. Because these are lower, oblique views of the adjacent set-back stories would be visible above their facades.

It is often preferable to express height forthrightly by creating full stories throughout, instead of trying to conceal bulk or trying to make it more palatable by setting it back. Such setbacks can look awkward or fussy or generally out of place. This is particularly true for smaller buildings, where the top story constitutes a substantial portion of the height and there is a possibility that that story will be seen from the street. Setbacks can either be an appropriate response to—or the cause for—the Design Guidelines discouragement of visible rooftop “additions.” It is fine to design two-story buildings, if they are convincing as such. There are a couple of potential problems in this case, however.

First, in order to screen the set-back portions, the parapets of the buildings are high, particularly on the four houses north of the corner building. Despite being drawn with particularly tall windows—the tops of the windows openings are about nine feet above the floors—the space above the second-floor windows is at least eight feet and will appear in reality as disproportionately high “foreheads,” even with devices such as cornice projections, panels or vents to break up the space visually.¹ The parapets should be lowered, but this would then expose the third floors. Indeed, any or all of the new houses could be and should be lowered a little; they generally have nine-foot floor-to-ceiling heights and the first floor of each is a full ten feet.

Second, to the extent that the third stories can be seen, it is perhaps unfortunate that the approach to designing the third story is essentially the same on what will appear to be distinct rows, belying their separateness and even suggesting that each row may be akin to the sort of *faux*-rowhouse apartment buildings increasingly common, with a set-back penthouse. More important, while the real-world views of buildings often end up differing from sight-line studies, it is likely that the drawings themselves will have to change, making the setbacks more likely to be conspicuous even before they leave the drafting table. Because these are attached structures, the party walls will probably have to rise above the roofs of each of the buildings for proper fire separation. This would make each building higher in profile, and the resultant fire walls—a couple feet above the roofs—would undoubtedly be a conspicuous part of the roofline.

And regarding party walls, the side walls of the houses on both sides of the remaining historic house at #1230 should *only abut* that house; the front elevations suggest instead that portions of those buildings will lap onto and over the side walls of the old house.

¹ Compare the height of 1228 4th Street above its second-story windows with that of the existing building at 1230, for instance.

Finally, the rear elevations will obviously require further development, as will the Ridge Street elevation of the corner building (its fenestration and the treatment of the parapet need some work²). In addition, the four one-story bays on the front elevation should have a more substantial cornice—more in keeping with Italianate houses of the 1850s to 1870s—instead of rails or balustrades on top. A deck and railing on such a rowhouse bay is an unusual and probably demonstrably useless feature. Without the deck, the fenestration of those facades could be more regular and in scale.

To address the likely issues with the set-back stories being visible at least in part *and* the issue of the parapets being generally too high and massive *and* to vary the appearance of the two rows more *and* in acknowledgment that historically there was variety in height here *and* to defer to the scale of the two-story historic buildings adjacent, as well as prevent unfortunate views over them,

the staff recommends that the first five houses north of the corner of Ridge be designed as of a full three stories each, and that the two buildings at the north end of the parcel be of only two stories (the heights of the bays would be adjusted or rather switched accordingly, to two stories and one story, respectively). In addition, the staff recommends that the demolition of #1230 be limited to the rear wall (and not floor and roof structure unless absolutely necessary); that no portions of new buildings be built on top of or over the side walls of #1230; that any one-story bays not hold decks; and that the rear elevations and the side elevation of #1220 continue to be developed.

² Regularizing the fenestration in terms of arrangement and size of openings is good to the extent possible. Old buildings with masonry load-bearing walls usually had side windows set fairly far back from the corners. The windows on the side of the rear portion are large and out of scale; to the extent possible, it would be better to generally employ single windows or double-ganged ones. There should be some work on the cornice/parapet. It's not clear yet exactly what the cornice is on any of the buildings yet, but the way it reads in the side elevation of #1220 is like a classical cornice above which the parapet rises. If that is so, then how it returns around the side is important—and it should probably just return and stop, because seen from the south, the projecting or contrasting horizontal piece looks like a cornice near the front, but then becomes a coping toward the rear. If it is to be a coping atop the parapet, then it could follow the entire front and side wall and step down where the parapet steps down on the side. And that step down should probably occur somewhat farther rearward, because the height in front establishes the front piece as the "main block," with the rear being perceived as the ell. The massing and size of this building suggest that it would look better if the third floor of the main block ended nearly two thirds back, instead of less than half way.