



CLEVELAND PARK HISTORICAL SOCIETY 3101 HIGHLAND PLACE, N.W. CLEVELAND PARK, D.C. 20008 (202) 244-127

ZONING COMMISSION CASE NO. 86-26  
CONNECTICUT AVENUE CORRIDOR  
CLEVELAND PARK

Testimony prepared by Kathleen Sinclair Wood

My testimony today will cover three areas.

- 1. The novel and pioneering approach enacted in the District of Columbia's first Zoning Law of 1920 with regard to use along Connecticut Avenue extended which has resulted in a compatible mix of residential interspersed with neighborhood retail shopping precincts making Connecticut Avenue an unusual avenue of extraordinary historic significance.
- 2. Connecticut Avenue as a designated Special Street in the Preservation and Historic Features Element of the Comprehensive Plan (DC Law 5-187) passed by the City Council (effective on March 16, 1985) and approved by the NCPC as part of the Federal element of the comprehensive plan.
- 3. The historic features of the Connecticut Avenue commercial district which were the reasons it was designated as part of the Cleveland Park Historic District and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

ZONING COMMISSION  
CASE No. 86-26  
EXHIBIT No. 250



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My name is Kathleen Sinclair Wood. I reside at 3101 Highland Place in Cleveland Park. I am the Executive Director of the Cleveland Park Historical Society. I am an architectural historian and was responsible for the historical research and preparation of the Cleveland Park Historic District application and National Register nomination form. I have been teaching the history of American Architecture for many years at the college level.

I have prepared my testimony today in conjunction with Richard Longstreth, associate professor in the American Studies Program and Department of Urban and Regional Planning at George Washington University. He is also Director of the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at George Washington University and author of the National Trust's book The Buildings of Main Street; A Guide to American Commercial Architecture. For the past five years he has been conducting extensive research on American commercial architecture focusing on, among other things, the process of decentralization of retail businesses in major metropolitan areas during the first half of the 20th century. In preparation for the Cleveland Park Historic District designation hearings he studied the history of the Connecticut Avenue corridor and consulted with us on the historical significance of the Cleveland Park commercial area both in its local and national context. We will be submitting a copy of his analysis of the area. He was planning to be here today to give testimony but because of his class schedule he is not available. He has agreed to come at a later date if you have questions. I also have a copy of his vitae if you would like to see it.

1. It is clear from the two tentative USE maps which were circulated, commented upon and changed prior to final approval in 1920 that a novel approach to zoning was being introduced along Connecticut Avenue. Professor Longstreth has said that the zoning approach on Connecticut Avenue "was a highly unusual initiative at that time and reflects the most advanced concepts of city planning for residential areas - it may well be of national significance. Preliminary evidence suggests this provision for commercial development along Connecticut Avenue subsequently influenced zoning and the nature of commercial development in other parts of the city and in nearby suburban communities."

Zoning was very new at this stage. New York City had enacted the first comprehensive zoning law in the United States in 1916. Between 1918 and 1920 the U.S. Congress debated and eventually passed legislation enabling the District to follow New York's lead and also pass a zoning law. The first DC Zoning law provided control over HEIGHT, AREA and USE. Three maps were prepared to show the restrictions for the entire city. The prevalent ideas at the time supported the separation of uses - large areas outside the central city were zoned residential and larger streets or avenues were zoned commercial. In the first tentative USE map Connecticut Avenue was zoned strip commercial but during the course of July and August this was changed to an innovative approach. The impetus for the Connecticut Avenue zoning came from the Newlands syndicate, which owned much of the adjoining land and which sought to have it developed in an exemplary manner out of broad civic concern and also to enhance the attractiveness of its own primary development, Chevy Chase, Maryland.

The USE Map that was approved on August 30th, 1920 (EXHIBIT A) restricted Connecticut Avenue to a mixture of residential and commercial. The avenue was zoned predominantly for residential apartment buildings with four clearly designated neighborhood shopping precincts. The first of these was for Cleveland Park, the second at Van Ness, the third at Fessenden Street and the fourth at Chevy Chase. These precincts were approximately one or two blocks in length and not necessarily on both sides of the street. In Cleveland Park the precinct ran from Macomb to Porter on the East side of Connecticut and from Ordway to Porter on the West side of the Avenue. At Woodley Park there was no commercial zone on Connecticut Avenue, commercial development was restricted to several blocks of Calvert Street beginning one block west of Connecticut. This approach to Connecticut Avenue was very forward thinking at this time just as the value of planning for the enhancement of neighborhoods was beginning to be recognized. (A universal HEIGHT limit of 55 feet was established for the whole of Connecticut Avenue. The AREA map designated specific rear and side yard requirements as well as enclosed court space and % of lot coverage.)

One of the most important early alterations in the zoning provisions was a 1931 amendment which allowed greater height for apartment buildings occupying a dramatically smaller percentage of their site. Thus 8-story apartment buildings were permitted along Connecticut Avenue if the building occupied only 51% of a sufficiently large site (previously buildings were limited to 5 stories and 75% lot coverage). The Kennedy Warren, the Broadmoor and Tilden Gardens are good examples of what the zoning changes made possible.

J.C. Nichols, considered among the nation's foremost developers of suburbs during the first half of the 20th century, was a member of the National Capital Planning Commission from its inception in 1926 until 1950 - his concepts were very influential in the development of Cleveland Park's commercial precinct.

He advocated the following characteristics for commercial districts:

- 1 or 2 blocks in length
- separated by at least 1/2 mile
- 1 story shops (2 stories maximum)
- wide roads
- clearly evident attractive parking lots
- control of signage
- buffers between commercial and residential areas

All of these characteristics are clearly evident in Cleveland Park's "Main Street and are, I feel, largely responsible for its continuing success today.

In the 1950s a prominent New York planning consultant, Harold M. Lewis was brought in to undertake the first complete study of the Zoning Regulations since 1920 and to prepare recommendations for a revised Zoning Code which was eventually enacted in 1958. In 1956 when Lewis prepared his final report of the Rezoning Study for the District of Columbia (A New Zoning Plan for the District of Columbia) he wrote: "the removal of strip commercial districts from the zoning map along a number of arterial streets in the outer reaches of the District must be cited for praise, although there are obviously other strips just as useless and noxious still remaining." (Lewis p. 7) Connecticut Avenue was a leader in this trend, and we can see today how the pioneering approach to zoning in 1920 has shaped the Avenue. It is important to note that with the exception of the high density development at Van Ness, Connecticut Avenue has retained its character as the broad Avenue lined with gracious apartment buildings representing a variety of popular architectural styles from the classical revivals of the 1920s, through the Art Deco and streamlined styles of the 30s to the International Style of the forties.

These apartment houses are interspersed with commercial areas serving the residents of the Avenue and the adjacent single family neighborhoods. As Lewis pointed out in his study "In general, there does not seem to be any need for more than one-story commercial structures in small neighborhood shopping districts nor more than two stories (offices over shops) in outlying community business centers. In both these types of districts, a height limit of three stories should provide for other permitted uses and still keep the districts compatible in scale with surrounding residential areas." (Lewis p. 43) He goes on to say "A Height of three stories will enable the designer, in most instances, to take advantage of the full bulk allowance, provide the necessary parking, and create an interesting design. Yet this is not out of scale with most of the residential areas that the community centers are associated with. Hence a limit of 45 feet is considered adequate. Small theater buildings and the few other special purpose buildings permitted in these centers can also be built within this height." (Lewis p. 54)

It seems to me that his analysis remains valid today. It is interesting to note that although the permissible building height has been higher since 1920 the Cleveland Park Shopping area has remained one and two stories in height, compatible with the neighboring residences and providing a visual distinction from the taller apartment buildings which are set back from the Avenue. This makes for a friendly informal streetscape conducive to use by the residents who walk along the street and greet friends and neighbors while they do their essential shopping.

In summary Professor Longstreth has said "as a whole, (the) precinct represents probably the finest architectural grouping of neighborhood commercial buildings in the National Capital - from a national perspective, the grouping is an excellent example of period/time." After discussing the significance of individual buildings and individual architects and developers he says of the Cleveland Park commercial precinct that it is an "outstanding example in city and region of design/settlement patterns during the decades between the two world wars - and embodies the most enlightened views toward suburban development, city planning, and the creation of low-density retail centers servicing residential neighborhoods. As an ensemble, it remains unusually intact for a precinct of this type; historic qualities predominate; many comparable precincts in U.S. have experienced considerable decay, destruction, and/or substantive alteration."

Connecticut Avenue from Rock Creek Park to the District line is a remarkable example of urban planning because the policy of clustered retail development was implemented with the city's first zoning ordinance of 1920. There may be comparable examples elsewhere encompassing so large an area at such an early date, but they are no doubt rare. From a historical perspective, this stretch of Connecticut Avenue is of great importance as a pioneering and perhaps unprecedented example of large-scale urban planning for residential districts. That foresight of almost seventy years ago has done much to contribute to the value and appeal the whole area has maintained to the present. Connecticut Avenue is a spine proceeding from suburban Maryland to downtown Washington D.C. and it feeds numerous residential communities which are enjoyed by people of all ages and differing economic abilities, by families and singles, real neighborhoods where people successfully live, work, shop and play in the city. Connecticut Avenue is one of the major reasons Washington is a very liveable city with intown residential communities which are highly prized as close-knit neighborhoods.

2. The entire length of Connecticut Avenue is a designated Special Street in the Preservation and Historic Features Element of the Comprehensive Plan passed by the City Council and enacted as DC Law 5-187 effective March 16, 1985. It was also adopted by the National Capital Planning Commission as part of the Federal Element of the Comprehensive Plan. According to Nancy Taylor at NCPC the Preservation and Historic Features Element of the Comprehensive Plan is the one area where the District and Federal elements are substantively identical.

The basic concept of the nation's capital being composed of special streets and places derives from L'Enfant's plan. Through the years this concept has been recognized and reinforced by the McMillan Plan, the early adoption of Zoning laws, the establishing of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission and the pursuit of a comprehensive plan. In 1965 the NCPC issued a publication popularly known as the "Brown Book" entitled 1965/1985: Proposed Physical Development Policies for Washington, D.C. which put forth detailed proposals that focused on the District of Columbia rather than the entire metropolitan area which was addressed in the Year 2000 Policies Plan. In this publication the concept of special places and special streets was made more explicit which led directly to this concept being included in the Comprehensive Plan passed in 1984 with amendments in 1985. The various agencies involved in the formulation of this plan proposed the specific special streets which were then formally designated by the City Council and the NCPC.

Connecticut Avenue meets all of the four criteria for designation of Special Streets.

1. It is historically significant as an important component of the McMillan Plan extending one of the most significant Avenues in the L'Enfant Plan which originates at the President's Park (Lafayette Square) in front of the President's House (the White House). It has additional importance because it passes through several existing (and one proposed) historic districts -Dupont Circle, Kalorama Triangle, Cleveland Park and Woodley Park.

2. It contributes to the design framework of the National Capital by serving as an axial or diagonal avenue leading directly from the ceremonial entrance at the District Line formed by Chevy Chase Circle, progressing along the Avenue of grand apartment houses across several distinctive historic bridges and terminating at the White House.

3. It embodies and displays a distinctive functional importance by providing amenities and serving as a focus for several neighborhoods and communities. The commercial nodes that were set aside early in the 20th century have developed as the "main streets" for the surrounding residential neighborhoods including single family homes, town houses, small, mid-rise and large apartment complexes - this is clearly evident at Chevy Chase, Nebraska Avenue, Cleveland Park, and Woodley Park. The only area where this sense has been completely eroded is at Van Ness - the evidence of its earlier history is still there in the shopping center at Yuma but that will soon disappear (and with it one of our most valuable neighborhood serving resources, the Kitchen Bazaar). The three-block commercial node in Cleveland Park serves as our "main street" or "village center", the gathering spot where neighbors meet one another. This was envisioned by John Sherman, the original developer, who built his architect-designed lodge (community center/streetcar waiting station) in 1898 at the corner of Newark and Connecticut where the Cleveland Park Library stands today.

Connecticut Avenue also promotes a special sense of entrance to the National Capital. It is a grand avenue from the ceremonial Chevy Chase Circle with its fountain to Lafayette Square and the White House.

4. Finally Connecticut Avenue is a conspicuous historic landmark with a series of architectural settings displaying a distinctive coherence which developed as a result of the enlightened early zoning regulations effecting the extended avenue from the Taft Bridge to Chevy Chase Circle. With specific reference to Cleveland Park, this commercial area developed in the 1920s as the first commercial node on Connecticut Avenue beyond the boundaries of the L'Enfant plan.

Connecticut Avenue is remarkably intact with most of its historic features still in place. The Comprehensive Plan makes its conservation and preservation a specific policy supported by the DC and Federal Governments. Connecticut Avenue is clearly more than merely a Corridor - A recent document prepared by the Office of Planning, the Connecticut Avenue Corridor Study, September, 1987, addresses this issue quite expertly. The Study details some of the policies of the Comprehensive Plan for Special Streets and gives more specific historical analysis of the Avenue and the Cleveland Park Commercial area. "Its urban design qualities, from tightly knit, patently urban and urbane at Farragut Square, old-worldly and evocative of stately elegance at Dupont Circle and in Kalorama, to small town charm and intimacy in Chevy Chase, are unsurpassed for richness and variety." "There is no question in the minds of residents who live along Connecticut Avenue, daily commuters who traverse its length, or architects and urban designers, that Connecticut Avenue is, indeed, a special street. From its downtown terminus at the northern edge of Lafayette Park facing the White House to Chevy Chase Circle, it is one of the city's best-defined thoroughfares and captures a range and depth of the city's cultural and architectural history, its historical patterns of urban development and natural environment in a fashion that no other street, avenue or "special street" duplicates." (p 14 of the Connecticut Avenue Corridor Study)

3. Finally I would like to reemphasize the historicity of the commercial area in Cleveland Park - our "Main Street". After extensive testimony - pro and con - before the Historic Preservation Review Board, the Cleveland Park Historic District was designated including the entire commercial area, Klinge Bridge and significant apartment buildings, the Broadmoor, Sedgwick Gardens and Tilden Gardens. I have included as Exhibit B the Decision designating the Cleveland Park Historic District which is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

By 1920 Cleveland Park was a thriving streetcar suburb totally dependent on the city for goods and services. The original developer's community center had burned down, the 1916 Colonial Revival Firehouse had been built and Wardman was establishing a new trend with the construction of the first apartment building along this stretch of Connecticut Avenue. Upon its completion Wardman constructed the Colonial Revival townhouses next door. Several other low rise apartment buildings immediately followed one of which housed the first commercial establishment, the Monterey Pharmacy, which opened in 1923. The first grocery stores followed immediately opening in 1925 in one-story structures and establishing the pattern of development for the east side of Connecticut between Macomb and Ordway. This typical 20s pattern of string street development is still quite evident today. When the Park and Shop was constructed in 1930 it presented an innovative new concept - one stop shopping with coordinated merchandising, an easily accessible front parking lot and an aesthetically unifying and pleasing Colonial Revival architectural style. This complex solved several problems created by the typical 20s string street development - traffic congestion along avenues because of inadequate provision for parking, and intense competition resulting in failed businesses and empty buildings. The idea of a unified development was subsequently pursued by the Uptown Theater with adjoining shops and the Ofty building, a mixed use building, both of 1936. The Macklin complex of 1939 also followed the mixed-use idea this time combining residential with an entrance on Newark Street with retail commercial opening onto Connecticut Avenue and providing a parking lot in front.

The Klinge Bridge designed by noted architect Paul Cret was constructed in 1931 and provided an impressive entrance to Cleveland Park. The Post Office and Library completed the provision of essential services to the residential neighborhood.

From its earliest days Cleveland Park's "Main Street" was focused on providing essential neighborhood services: drug stores, grocery stores, beauty shops, barbers, drycleaners, a hardware store, confectionary store, a bank, florist, and gas stations. Exhibit C demonstrates that many of these same services are still supplied today, but the number of bars, restaurants, fast food and carry out places are increasing. This exhibit also provides the original dates of construction of the commercial buildings.

We applaud the tremendous amount of work accomplished by the Office of Planning in preparing the Connecticut Avenue Corridor Study and the specific reports pertaining to this case 86-26. We urge the Zoning Commission to join us in finding reasonable and workable zoning regulations for maintaining and enhancing the historic character of this grand avenue and its historic commercial neighborhood shopping precincts. We have a valuable historic resource here, not solely in terms of architectural structures - we have a pattern of living that works, that makes our city liveable, that provides a residential tax base and we have a unique opportunity to create zoning regulations which will support its continuing preservation.