

Minutes of the Avon Hill Neighborhood Conservation District

Monday, November 19, 2012 - 5:30 P.M. - 831 Massachusetts Ave., Basement Conference Rm

Commissioners Present: Theresa Hamacher, *Chair*; Robert Crocker and Catherine Henn, *Members*; Mark Golberg and Constantin von Wentzel, *Alternates*

Commissioners Absent: Art Bardige, *Vice Chair*; Heli Meltsner, *Alternate*

Staff Present: Sarah Burks

Members of the Public: see attached sign-in sheet

With a quorum present, Chair Theresa Hamacher called the meeting to order at 5:36 P.M. She made introductions and reviewed the hearing procedures. She designated alternates Mark Golberg and Constantin von Wentzel to vote.

Public Hearing: Alterations to Designated Properties

AH-436: 85 Washington Ave., by Matthew L. Fisher. Exterior alterations including new mansard roof at third floor, bay window, replace and add windows, alter doors and entries, reduce paving and lower retaining walls, install fence at rear, as per plans.

Ms. Hamacher noted that it had been the Commission's practice to only require direct abutters on the Commission to recuse themselves, but that abutters-to-abutters could participate. Mr. von Wentzel noted that he was not a direct abutter to the subject property and that he would participate in the case.

Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner, showed slides of 85 Washington and the neighboring buildings. She summarized the application. She described the 1940 garrison colonial house designed by architect Morton Howard. She explained that it was one of a group of three houses of the same design positioned in a U shape, forming a center courtyard. She described architectural features including the overhanging 2nd floor, gable roof, and divided light windows. She indicated that there was not a lot of ornamentation on the house, which spoke to the modernity of the structure despite the traditional style.

Matthew Fisher, the applicant, introduced himself, his girlfriend, Leah Nation, and their architect, Paul Hajian. Mr. Fisher stated that the house had not been maintained for several years. He described the proposal to increase the usable space in the house by raising the roof and changing the roof shape to a mansard. He noted that #89 Washington Avenue had a rear addition from 1962 to increase its size. He said it was unlikely that he could get a variance at the present time for a similar addition to the footprint of the building, given the tight siting on the lot. He explained that was the reason that they proposed to go up instead of out.

Paul Hajian, the architect, explained that he had studied several architectural options for the problem of increasing the usable space in the house. One option he considered was raising the roof but maintaining the roof gable, however this option made the massing of the house look out of scale with the other two.

Mr. Hajian described the design proposal which involved changing the gable roof to a mansard roof but no change to the location of the primary door (facing #81 Washington Avenue). On the street facing side, however, the off center door and missing windows were off putting. He proposed removing the door and installing two windows in the left bay.

Catherine Henn inquired whether the proposal was to replace all the windows. Ms. Burks noted that when the applicant had consulted her about the design she had noted that 2-over-2 windows would be more typical of the mansard style than 6-over-6. However, she had seen the condition of the existing 6-over-6 windows, nor was she familiar with the material quality of windows of that period. Mr. Hajian commented that the 2-over-2 arrangement made for a quieter facade. Ms. Henn asked how many original windows remained in the house. Mr. Hajian said some had been replaced already, but he was not sure. Mr. von Wentzel remarked that the 1940 windows would not have wavy glass like in a nineteenth century window. Ms. Hamacher noted that in most cases, replacement windows don't last as long or remain as effective as the original window with a storm.

Ms. Hamacher noted that there were no members of the public present at the meeting. She read two letters into the record including a letter of support from Thomas Parker and Mary Price of 89 Washington Avenue, in which they expressed support for the new mansard roof shape. She then read a letter of opposition from Heli Meltsner, of 74 Avon Hill Street. Ms. Meltsner's letter pointed out the relationship of the group of three houses, the architectural integrity of 85 Washington Street. She remarked in the letter how the house conveyed its period of design during a time of economic stress and patriotism during World War II. She discouraged allowing faux historic design in the district and recommended the use of dormers rather than changing the roof shape.

Ms. Hamacher inquired why dormers within the existing gable roof had been rejected by the proponents. Mr. Hajian explained that there was only a height of 5'-8.5" to the ridge on the third floor, so dormers would either have to be higher than the ridge or the ridge would have to be raised in order to create usable space. He said the shadow studies had indicated that there was least shadow cast with the hip shape of a mansard roof than with a taller gable roof with dormers.

Ms. Henn asked why a half size window was selected for the front right corner of the house. Mr. Hajian explained that the shorter window was used to accommodate a kitchen counter inside.

Mr. Golberg asked what roofing material was proposed for the mansard roof. Mr. Fisher showed a sample of a rubberized slate. Mr. von Wentzel remarked that he had used a similar product on his mansard roof.

Mr. Hajian described the proposal to remove the rear door (facing the courtyard and 89 Washington Ave.) and replacing it with a projecting bay window. Mr. Fisher described the anticipated landscaping changes including reduction of concrete paving and lowering of the retaining walls.

Ms. Hamacher reviewed the principles, standards, and guidelines for the District. Ms. Burks commented that the existing house did retain the integrity of its original design. It was more significant as part of the group of three than on its own. However, the mansard design was sensitive to neighborhood character. She explained that the director of the Historical Commission had recommended preservation of the house for what it was, though it was a modest house. Ms. Burks suggested there might be a compromise solution if the Commission could review the other design studies. She suggested further study of raising the ridge by 2-3' and installing dormers.

Mr. Golberg said he could find the change in roof shape acceptable if the details were done right. It was unreasonable to expect no additions to such a small house. The design was sensitive to the neighboring buildings and was a practical solution to the space problem. If it were a larger house to begin with, he would be less sympathetic to a proposal for an addition.

Ms. Henn she was appreciative of Ms. Meltsner's strong argument against changing the roof shape, but she did not consider it incongruous to the district. She said the standards said to balance the interests of the homeowners with those of the District. She objected to the short kitchen window facing the street.

Mr. Crocker said he would prefer to see an option other than a mansard roof. He asked to see the other studies.

Ms. Hamacher asked if there were objections to the removal of the chimney at the back of the house. Mr. von Wentzel did not object because it was a minor architectural feature. He noted that the goals of the district were not always in agreement. On one hand they were tasked with allowing change and on the other with preserving National Register listed buildings. He said he would not want to create a precedent for everyone to be able to change their house so dramatically, but it was a practical design solution in this case. He noted that the direct abutters were enthusiastic about the design. One person he had met called the group of three mid century houses a blight on the street. He remarked that houses evolve. The proposal was not insensitive but it was a very dramatic change. He noted that the Commission had been pretty strict about changes allowed to other National Register district houses. Should the Commission hold all three owners hostage to the 1940 vision of the builder?

Ms. Hamacher noted that the opinions of the architecture of the three houses might change in another 40 years. She said she did not consider the change in the roof shape to be fakery, because the bones of the house would remain including the garrison and the window openings.

Mr. Crocker asked how many groupings of Colonial Revival buildings like this existed in Cambridge. He mentioned the group on Foster Street. Ms. Burks said it was a good question and she could think of a couple, but she did not have an answer for the number of similar examples in the city. She could look into it.

Ms. Henn asked if the Commission would make a decision at the present meeting or ask to see alternatives. Mr. Golberg replied that he did not need to see alternative designs. Ms. Hamacher asked Ms. Burks if approval would set a bad precedent for the District. Ms. Burks replied that every case has its own unique circumstances and it would not create a solid precedent for changing every other house in the District. It would, however, likely create a precedent for changes to the two other houses in this group of three. It would be the most dramatic stylistic change in the District since the remodeling at 47 Raymond Street. She asked if a model or a site visit were wanted by the Commission, but there was consensus that neither was needed.

Mr. von Wentzel said he was not convinced that all the windows should be replaced. He asked for more information about the existing windows. Ms. Hamacher agreed.

Ms. Henn suggested the Commission proceed with a vote. Ms. Hamacher drafted a motion to approve the changes, as presented, with the exception of the replacement windows which would require further documentation and discussion at a future hearing. She added findings in support of the motion including that the mansard roof was the most practical solution to achieving more usable space in the third floor, that the proposal would maintain open space

and vistas, and that the house would maintain its place as part of a group of three with the houses at 87 and 89 Washington Avenue. Ms. Henn seconded the motion to approve the application based on the outlined findings. Mr. Golberg noted the approval of the abutters. Mr. von Wentzel noted the existing size of the house at 1200 square feet. The motion passed 4-1 with Mr. Crocker voting in opposition.

Mr. Fisher thanked the Commission for its time and asked what documentation he could bring back about the windows. Ms. Henn asked for an inventory of the existing windows including what was original, what was a replacement, and what were the conditions of the existing windows.

Staff Report

Ms. Burks reported on her site visit to 79 Raymond Street with Art Bardige, the architect and the homeowner to inspect the plantings and review the pre-existing landscaping. She said the photographs of the pre-existing plantings showed that there were dense evergreens along the front of the property before construction began. She said she and Mr. Bardige had agreed that the current conditions were not in violation of the certificate of appropriateness and did not require further review by the Commission.

Ms. Burks reported on her discussion with a condo owner at 33 Washington Avenue about replacement windows and about the coming application by the Cambridge Nursery School for additions and alterations.

Ms. Hamacher said that several of the members terms were expiring. The members should recruit interested owners in the district who might like to serve. She said that she and Art wanted to step down as chair and vice chair, but would continue to serve as members if reappointed or until replaced. Ms. Burks recommended putting election of a new chair and vice chair on the agenda for the next meeting.

Minutes

Mr. von Wentzel moved to approve the March 19, 2012 and the September 24, 2012 minutes, as submitted. Ms. Henn seconded, and the motion passed 4-0 with Mr. Crocker abstaining.

Ms. Henn moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Golberg seconded the motion, which passed 5-0. The meeting adjourned at 7:28 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah L. Burks
Preservation Planner

**Members of the Public
that Signed Attendance Sheet
November 19, 2012**

Leah Nation	85 Washington Ave
Matthew Fisher	85 Washington Ave
Paul Haijan	29 Williams St, Watertown

Addresses are in Cambridge, unless otherwise specified.