

Minutes of the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Commission

Mon., Dec. 14, 2009 at 6:00P.M., Friends Meeting House, 5 Longfellow Pk., Cambridge

Members present: Bill King, Judith Dortz, members
Deborah Masterson, Grenelle Scott, alternate member

Staff present: Susan Maycock

Members of the Public: See attached list

In the absence of the Chair and Vice Chair, Bill King was selected to chair the meeting. He called the meeting to order at 6:05PM, made introductions, and reviewed the hearing procedures. He designated alternates Masterson and Scott to vote on all matters.

Public Hearing: Alterations to Designated Properties

HCM-60 Amendment: 245 Mount Auburn St, by Aaron Kemp. To amend project to include construction of dormers and a rear gabled addition.

Ms. Maycock described the history of the project, the owner's previous approvals, and the current application for an amended Certificate of Appropriateness. She pointed out that the Commission had informally discussed the addition of two dormers on the south façade at the November meeting, but that the rear gabled addition was new.

Aaron Kemp, owner of 245 Mt. Auburn St., presented the history of the project, and described the neglected state of the house when he purchased it and his desire to recreate appropriate historic detailing since the original detail had been removed or covered up over the years. He said that he had met with the CHC staff and with his neighbors about his plans.

He explained that adding the rear gable would allow him to restore the rear face of the main gable to its original pitch, a pitch that was changed when the saltbox roof was added in the 1920s. Adding the gable would also create more space in the back of the house, away from the noise of Mt Auburn Street. Although it would create only a small 11' x 12' room with a low ceiling, it would allow him to open up the staircase and to move the existing bathroom from the front of the house to the back. The front part of the house has a 7 ½' ceiling on the first floor while the current back has an 8' ceiling, which means that the ceiling in a second floor addition on the back would be low.

He explained his proposal to add dormers to the front of the house, instead of restoring the second floor windows to their original size and configuration, because the increased height in the dormers would provide a view of the river.

He said that he has tried to be conscientious in responding to the neighbors' needs and concerns, and is not changing the footprint of the house which is very small, 25' x 30'. He pointed out that there is a distance of 42' between his house and the Yager's house at 6 Camden Place and that this is more space than between most of the houses in the neighborhood.

In explaining the proposed window trim, he said that he thought the window hoods improved the look of the house, but that Charles Sullivan of the CHC had suggested eliminating them on the rear addition as they were too formal for the back of such a simple house. Except for the addition of window hoods on the front of the house, Mr. Kemp said that he was keeping everything as simple as possible.

Mr. King asked about the second chimney and whether he was planning to remove it since it is not shown on the drawings. He would like to see it retained as he feels that having the chimney is consistent with the character of the neighborhood.

Ms. Dortz asked whether the chimneys were functional.

Mr. Kemp said that they were functional, but that the exterior chimney was added in the 1920s and was not in keeping with the 1850s date of the house. He added that he would like to remove the exterior chimney because it is causing the wall of the house to bow out, but that he understood that the Commission likes to retain chimneys and so he has not requested its removal.

Mr. King asked whether any of the proposed work in tonight's application required BZA action.

Mr. Kemp responded that he has met with Sean O'Grady in ISD to discuss the proposed plans and to calculate the FAR, and it appears that the project is within the allowed FAR.

In response to a question by Ms. Masterson about the original roof pitch, Mr. Kemp explained the changes in the house's roofline over time and how he wants to change it now to make the original form of the house stand out more.

Ms. Dortz stated that she appreciated what he wants to do, but she questioned why he wants to do it: to improve the look of the house or to add more space?

Mr. Kemp responded that he is really a preservationist and it makes him sad to look at the house in its current condition. He wants to restore the interior to an 1850s look. He said it would be nice to have more space on the second floor and it would allow him to move the existing bathroom into the back part of the house. He thinks that adding

any floor space within walking distance of Harvard Square would be valuable, and this plan is the only way he could think of to make additions without exceeding the FAR.

Mr. King asked about the north side of the house and whether the slopes of the roof there will be different.

Mr. Kemp said that the roof slopes would be different, but that he thought that would produce an interesting roofline. He said that the small porch added in the 1920s doesn't draw your attention, and that even with the 2-story ell, the house would remain very small, like a doll's house.

Ms. Masterson asked whether the proposed dormers would change the front roofline and whether the bottom of the proposed windows would be at the same level as the existing windows.

Mr. Kemp responded that the dormers will not change the pitch or roofline in front and that the bottom of the windows will be 3" higher than they are now so that the windows will not have to be so big in order to have the meeting rail at the level of the current eaveline.

Mr. King asked for questions of fact from the public.

Paul Yager, 6 Camden Place, asked what the estimates are for building the addition and the dormers.

Mr. Kemp said that the contractor had given him an estimate of \$9,200 to frame, sheathe, and roof the gable addition and \$2,500 to build the dormers.

Mr. Yager commented that these estimates are dangerously low and that the project is likely to cost much more.

Comments from the public.

Terry Holzman, 249 Mt. Auburn Street, felt that the price tag was not our business. He said that he was a big supporter of this project which will improve the appearance of the building.

Mr. Yager said that he had two main issues with the project: 1) the effect of the project on his own house at 6 Camden Place, and 2) the proper use of the house not to recreate it historically but to produce a well-blended design that would enhance and tighten the character of the neighborhood. He said that when Aaron Kemp first talked with him, he said that he might want to put the bathroom in a dormer but in no way would he place an addition facing Mr. Yager's house, but that now his proposed gable addition faces directly into the Yagers' house with windows facing their bedrooms and living room.

Mr. Yager showed the Commission drawings he had made of what his view of the back of Kemp's house would be with the proposed addition and what the interior space of the added room would be and pointed out that the window sills would be only a few inches off the floor. He showed a drawing of the bedroom on the south (front) side with the proposed dormers and said that the proposal would only marginally open up the space and add light. He realized that the Commission is not concerned with interior space, but he showed an interior drawing of an "alternate" scheme that he felt would provide improved light and space in the south side second floor. He added that he would only share the exterior and details of this scheme with Mr. Kemp if Mr. Kemp would agree not to build the rear gable that is so offensive to him. He stated that he would not want Mr. Kemp to attempt to expand both the north and south sides, if he saw Mr. Yager's plans.

Mr. Yager observed that he thinks Mr. Kemp's current plan is naïve and that the danger of going ahead with such a low building estimate is that the job cannot be done for that price and that it would be abandoned and degrade the neighborhood. He said that he would feel bad if other neighbors did not realize that this is a half-baked proposal that needs more work to come to a better solution. He also expressed concern over the loss of views of the treetops and sky from his property.

Rachel Seidel, 1 Camden Place, said that the proposed gable imposes on her house and that she was not entirely happy with it. She felt that the addition needed more time to work out some of the issues raised, and that it was important for neighbors on such a little street to make some concessions.

Fredda Zuckerman, 6 Camden Place, was, like Mr. Yager, concerned about light, but she appreciated that Mr. Kemp has tried to work with his neighbors.

Paul Malherbe, 1 Camden Place, said that he was okay with how the proposed addition would look from his house, but he also hoped that Mr. Kemp would take more time to create a project that did not project so much. Because Camden Place is so small, he thought that projects should try to avoid building up or out. He thought that doing less on the north and opening up the south side should be explored.

Emily Robertson, 7 Camden Place, said that she moved in only 3 weeks ago and had come to the meeting to support Mr. Kemp who has worked so hard to improve his house, but she realized that the issues are complicated.

Mike Robertson, 7 Camden Place, said that the house was falling down and was a disgrace. He was thrilled to see what Mr. Kemp wants to do, and is enthusiastic about anyone who wants to put money into a house to fix it up. He recommended to Mr. Kemp

that he put a dormer all across the front of the house and really open it up, but Mr. Kemp said that he thought that the Commission would not allow that and that he was trying to work closely with what is allowed by the HCMNCDC.

Mr. Yager said that he thought there was a misunderstanding about what the mission of the NCD is and thought that Mr. Kemp thinks that the Commission wants only to get back to the historic look of the house. He asked how he could present his scheme and to whom while preventing Mr. Kemp from using it without compensation.

Ms. Dortz said that this is the owner's house and if Mr. Yager does a design and Mr. Kemp doesn't like it, that is his prerogative and he can propose what he wants, not what Mr. Yager wants.

Mr. Kemp said that he thought that Mr. Yager's drawing of the view of the back of his house looked larger than it actually would be.

Mr. Yager responded that he had lifted the roofline to show what it would look like from his garden level.

Betty Snyder, 221 Mount Auburn Street, said that she lived on Bradbury Street before Riverview was built, and that when Riverview was being designed studies were done to see what kind of shadow the new building would cast. She asked whether similar studies have been done for this addition.

Mr. Kemp said that his proposed addition would block some sunlight and some sky based on the views that he and Mr. Yager drew from all Mr. Yager's windows. He added that he thinks it will be a change but that he thinks it will be better than Mr. Yager thinks, and he hopes that the Commission can tentatively approve his proposed design.

In response to a question about opening up the front of the house, Mr. Kemp said that he felt that pulling the windows up to be able to see the river was enough. He added that he has tried to preserve every detail, trim dimensions, and look of the old house.

Ms. Dortz said she appreciated that he is so enthusiastic and she doesn't want to squelch that, but she thought that he should think more about the reality of what he wants to do with this little house.

Ms. Masterson said that it was not the role of the Commission to design the house for Mr. Kemp, but that it might make sense for the owner to postpone for a month to rethink his project. She put a 144 sq ft addition on her house that included changing the roofline and this turned out to be a huge change for her, even though the sq footage was small. She said that if pushed, she was not feeling positive about the current application.

Ms. Scott agreed.

Ms. Dortz said that anything more drastic on the south side of the house might be harder to get through the commission.

Mr. King said that he had no problem with the changes to the front of the house as proposed. He also thought that the design of the rear addition was not inappropriate and he was less than sympathetic with complaints that some of the neighbors' light might disappear. He cited a project near his own house and said that he felt that blocking some sky because of changing rooflines is just part of living in Cambridge.

Mr. Kemp said that he was happy to consider other options, but that the condition of the house is very difficult to live with right now, especially for someone with asthma. He said that he can't fix up the interior until the exterior is done and that he has put a tremendous amount of effort into the current design and that he doesn't want to delay.

Ms. Dortz strongly advised eliminating the window moldings on the south façade as they feel too fancy for this house.

Mr. Kemp said that he could live without those window hoods but that he thought they were classy.

Mr. King said that he didn't object to the window trim. He recommended continuing the hearing to the next meeting when the commission could consider any design modifications that Mr. Kemp presented. He hoped that the present four members would be in attendance at the next meeting.

Mr. Kemp said that he was ready to start tomorrow and that he didn't want to put it off because it was getting very cold to take the roof off the house.

Mr. Yager said that he thought that cutting off alternative approaches at this time would be a mistake.

Mr. Kemp responded that he definitely wanted to see Mr. Yager's alternative, but that if he didn't like it he would like to go ahead with his current proposal.

Mr. King asked whether the Commission considered that the application before it was complete enough to approve and whether it was appropriate for the neighborhood. He added that the Commission could set conditions with any approval.

Ms. Dortz said that her only hesitation was that this application was not really well thought through. She would support the front dormers, but had some questions about the proposal for the back.

Mr. Kemp said that he got the feeling that the commission would prefer to postpone the decision, but that he hadn't heard any reasons for turning the project down.

He added that he really liked this design, felt that it was in keeping with the neighborhood, and wanted it to be approved.

Mr. King said that he could consider the project inappropriate because it would affect the residential privacy and views of neighboring properties which was contrary to one of the goals of the district. He also indicated that he didn't have confidence that the project could be completed for the low price estimated without further changes.

Six letters in support of the project and one letter in opposition were accepted as part of the record.

Ms. Dortz MOVED that the application for an amended Certificate of Appropriateness for changes to 245 Mount Auburn Street be approved as submitted. Mr. King SECONDED.

Ms. Masterson said that she thought that the gable roof added too much mass to the house, obstructed views in a very dense neighborhood, and could be improved through further design study.

The motion FAILED 2-2.

Ms. Dortz MOVED to approve the two front dormers as submitted. Ms. Masterson SECONDED. The motion PASSED 4-0.

Mr. King explained the appeal procedure.

Minutes

Ms. Dortz MOVED that the minutes of the 11/09/2009 meeting be approved with one correction on page 3. Ms. Scott SECONDED. The motion PASSED 4-0.

With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 8:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Maycock
Survey Director

Members of the Public attending December 14, 2009

Terry Holzman, 249 Mount Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138
Todd Holzman, 249 Mount Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138
Aaron Kemp, 245 Mount Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138
Paul Malherbe, 1 Camden Place, Cambridge, MA 02138
Emily Robertson, 7 Camden Place, Cambridge, MA 02138
Michael S. Robertson, 7 Camden Place, Cambridge, MA 02138
Rachel Seidel, 1 Camden Place, Cambridge, MA 02138
Betty Snyder, 221 Mount Auburn Street, Cambridge, MA 02138
Paul Yager, 6 Camden Place, Cambridge, MA 02138
Fredda Zuckerman, 6 Camden Place, Cambridge, MA 02138