

MINUTES OF THE MID CAMBRIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD CONSERVATION DISTRICT COMMISSION

Monday, May 1, 2023, 6:00 PM, online Zoom meeting

Commission Members present: Tony Hsiao, *Chair*; Lestra Litchfield, *Vice Chair*; Monika Pauli, Katinka Hakuta, *Members*

Absent: Charles Redmon, *Member*

Staff present: Allison A. Crosbie, Preservation Administrator
Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner

Members of the Public: See attached list

Meeting held via online zoom webinar <https://tinyurl.com/MCmay2023>. Due to statewide emergency actions limiting the size of public gatherings in response to COVID-19, this meeting was held online with remote participation and was closed to in-person attendance. The public was able to participate online via the Zoom webinar platform. The meeting ID was 811 0139 3504.

Commission Chair Tony Hsiao made introductions, explained the process for the hearing, and called the meeting to order at 6:05.

Case MC-6689: 303 Harvard/39A Lee Street, by LST Condominium LLC. Alter fenestration, construct accessible entrance.

Ms. Allison Crosbie, preservation administrator, presented slides of the 16-unit apartment building constructed in 1938.

Architect Matthew Macchi explained that the project consists of a gut renovation of the apartment building and includes enlarging windows on the basement level and constructing an accessible entrance at the Lee street entrance comprising the installation of a lift and creating a flush entryway.

Commission Questions

Vice Chair Lestra Litchfield asked for more information regarding the proposed lift, including exact location, how will it be enclosed, and how visible it will be. Mr. Macchi answered that he hadn't finalized the type of lift. Ms. Litchfield also asked about window wells. Mr. Macchi replied that there are existing window wells that will be dug out, and two new window wells.

Mr. Hsiao observed that there are many versions of lifts available, and it will make a difference as to which one is used. Mr. Hsiao stated that he is surprised not to see a proposed lift in the drawings. He also noticed that there appears to be additional steps in the drawings. Mr. Macchi explained that they are looking for a lift on discount and described the types he has been considering, including a vertical platform lift. Mr. Hsiao remarked that the mechanism for the lift would be higher than the lift and exceed the height of the proposed side wall.

Mr. Hsiao asked what is the aesthetic that they are going for. Mr. Macchi said they would like to match the brick. Mr. Jason Savage, the owner, interjected that it could also be darker. Commissioner Monika Pauli pointed out the existing balusters and said that lifts can sometimes come in custom colors. Mr. Jason stated that he would prefer black.

Mr. Hsiao asked about the entrance door and surrounding detail. Mr. Macchi stated that the paneling will be duplicated. Ms. Litchfield asked if the interior paneling will be replicated. Mr. Macchi answered yes, the whole thing will move up.

Commissioner Katinka Hakuta asked how many accessible units are in the building. Mr. Macchi answered one. Ms. Hakuta asked if it will be cleared in the winter time. Mr. Macchi replied that maintenance will take care of keeping the lift clear of any snow or debris.

Mr. Hsiao asked if the building currently has an elevator. Mr. Macchi answered no.

Public Questions and Comments

Ms. Marilee Meyer of 10 Dana Street asked for clarification of the raising of the landing of the stairs. Mr. Macchi showed drawings and explained that he's creating one continuous surface for wheelchair access into the building. Ms. Meyer asked about raising the door, Mr. Macchi said some of the proportions will change as a result, but the proportions are currently top heavy. Ms. Meyer remarked that a new accessible entrance with a lift was constructed at 9 Dana Street.

Commission Comments

Ms. Litchfield stated that the project is difficult to review without knowing more about the lift, especially how it anchors to the wall. She remarked that she prefers black so it will read as part of the railing.

Ms. Pauli agreed and suggested they follow up with staff on the final detailing of the doorway to make sure it's as good as can be.

Ms. Litchfield asked about the new window well. Mr. Macchi stated that the lift and pilaster will hide this detail. Ms. Litchfield suggested eliminating this window to shift the lift away from the pilaster. Mr. Hsiao explained how not seeing the apparatus in the modeling is leading to issues. Mr. Hsiao also expressed concern over the fact that the building has no elevator. Mr. Macchi replied that they came up with the best solution to creating an accessible entrance taking everything into account. Mr. Hsiao suggested moving the lift to the left, but he knows there could be potential impact to the interior. Mr. Savage said they could move the windows and are willing to commit to that. Mr. Hsiao stated that this is the main entrance to the building and should not be compromised.

Ms. Litchfield motioned to approve the application with recommendations, including the following: to accommodate the lift, shift the basement window to the left, by about a foot to make the lift look like it belongs there. Consult with staff on final details. Use black color for the lift.

Ms. Pauli seconded, and the motion passed 4-0.

Case MC-6693: 106 Hancock Street, by Steven Greenberg. Install solar panels.

Ms. Crosbie presented a brief history of the property, noting that it is listed on the National Register which makes the review binding.

Mr. Kevin O'Leary, from Smartroof Capital, presented drawings of the proposed layout of solar panels on the roof. He also showed photographs of the building including the dormer with one panel, and noted the shallow roof where other solar panels were proposed.

Commission Questions

Mr. Hsiao clarified the locations on the shed dormer, and that panel #5 was the most visible. Mr. O'Leary confirmed.

Ms. Pauli asked if panel #5 could be moved to another location. Mr. O'Leary referred to the drawings and explained the requirements by the City of Cambridge for a fire walkway. Mr. Hsiao asked what would be the consequence of removing just panel #5. Mr. O'Leary answered that it was the owner's call. Mr. Greenberg said that he would like to maximize the power generated.

Ms. Litchfield asked how far from the eave line are the panels on the shed dormer. Mr. O'Leary answered 18 inches.

Public Questions

Ms. Meyer asked for clarification on the number of panels and she asked about the skylights. Mr. O'Leary said they are to remain and clarified the layout. She also asked if the panels come in different sizes. Mr. O'Leary responded that they only come in one standard size. Ms. Meyer also asked about the rotation of the panels, Mr. O'Leary further clarified the layout.

Public Comments

Ms. Meyer said these cottages on Hancock Street are her favorite, she thinks this is a good project, but is concerned about the visibility of panel #5 on the dormer. She also mentioned that there are now integrated solar shingles and asked if they use them. Mr. O'Leary replied that they have not been available.

Commission Comments

Ms. Hakuta asked about the roof color where panel #5 is located, that it looks different but realized it is the same color as the rest of the roof. She noted that the dark panels will stand out but is supportive of the project.

Ms. Litchfield commented that since this is a National Register building and the review is binding, that panel #5 should be eliminated since it's the only one that's visible.

Ms. Pauli agreed stating that she feels that #5 is the only real issue for her and she supports the project.

Mr. Hsiao concurred, noting that if the roof was a darker color, it would be less visible, but in this case, it will be very visible since the roof is a light gray color. He also appreciates reducing

the use of fossil fuels, but he recommends removing just panel #5 because it is a historically significant structure. He also stated that he has no issue with the other panels.

Mr. O'Leary confirmed that #5 can't be relocated and if the owner approves, they can remove that panel. Mr. Greenberg, the owner, agreed with the removal and is happy to proceed with this.

Ms. Hakuta motioned to approve the application on the condition that solar panel #5 be removed. Ms. Litchfield seconded, and the motion passed 4-0.

Case MC-6690: 142 Amory Street, by 142 Amory Street LLC. Construct 2-family house.

Ms. Crosbie explained that a building had collapsed on this site and was demolished in 2022 and noted that the proposed new construction was a binding review.

Architect Kelly Boucher presented the project, explaining that the site is complex, it has an irregular shape and sits within two zoning districts, BA and C1. The proposed construction is subject to a multi-plane formula that requires the building to be set back at each successive floor. Because of this, they can't build out to full gross floor area (GFA). And because the floors get smaller as you go up, they can't build a triple decker or other multi-family structure. The owner is proposing to build a 2-unit residence with the front unit on Amory Street and another unit in the rear. Ms. Boucher also pointed out that they are allowed 4,3462 square feet (SF) but they are proposing only 3,337 SF. She also stated that they meet all the zoning metrics. The zoning requires 23% open space, but they have 51%, so they are not filling out the lot.

Ms. Boucher presented drawings including shadow studies, massing diagrams, and a 3-d view, describing the project as a more modern gable end building with dormers, slightly shorter than the previous building. She also pointed out the surrounding context, the abutters, and adjacent large parking lot, and other houses on the street.

Commission Questions

Ms. Litchfield asked Ms. Boucher if they considered doing a fully modern design. Ms. Boucher replied that they looked at several options but wanted to go with a contemporary design that straddles the blocky rectangular residence type but not too boxy. Ms. Litchfield asked if they considered a triple decker. Ms. Boucher answered that with the zoning they can't get close to the property line, so big flat walls are required to be far from the property line, which means they can't build triple deckers the way they used to.

Ms. Pauli asked about siding. Ms. Boucher responded that they had not finalized the materials but were looking at some wood, probably the corner boards, and said the siding at the top had not been developed. Each unit would be different, possibly clapboard in the rear.

Ms. Litchfield asked how many materials were on the front of the building. Ms. Boucher answered three, probably Hardieplank and wood with different widths and profiles, they have not been finalized.

Ms. Pauli asked why there are so few windows facing the street on the second floor. Ms. Boucher replied there are bedrooms on the front, and she showed a 3-d Revit model with the interior and windows on the other facade. She also showed a stairway that is lit from windows

on the side. Ms. Hakuta asked about creating a matching window on the second floor on the left side. Ms. Boucher answered that it would be in the middle of the stairs, so it's a little tricky.

Mr. Hsiao stated he understood the complexity of the project and the zoning issues, and he said there appears to be a lot of parts to this and that he understands the internal organization. Mr. Hsiao also said that it appears that this discussion revolves around what is being designed here, have you determined where you're landing on, traditional or hybrid? He asked if the staircase could be expressed more directly, and do the plans and elevations speak to each other? Ms. Litchfield agreed with Mr. Hsiao. Mr. Hsiao explained that they have a blank canvas to work with so they could invent a new approach on this site; what is the underlying attitude of this site? For a contemporary approach in a historic neighborhood what are the guiding principles? Aside from zoning constraints, is there a guiding principle?

Mr. Bill Senne, the owner, responded with some context, noting that he has done a lot of contemporary homes as well as more traditional homes, and with all the complex zoning they have been figuring out what is the right house for the site that responds to the marketplace. He also stated that he didn't think a contemporary style was the right approach here. A modern house would stick out too much, that a hybrid would be better and more in demand. They looked at a project on Mt. Auburn Street, a modern gable house that nods to the neighboring houses. He also stated that they did not want to compete with the older homes, but they do want to add a modern flare.

Mr. Hsiao remarked that there is no cut and dry definition of what is "modern," that it's simplistic to think that boxy means modern and everything else is traditional. He also said that showing precedents would have clarified the attitude they are going for, that the Commission can only react to what is being proposed here. It's hard to ask questions without the bigger question about your approach resolved. The Commission needs to know more about the overarching question to better review the project.

Ms. Litchfield explained that it's difficult to do anything other than comment at this point and suggested proceeding with public questions and comments and get to Commission comments. Mr. Hsiao agreed.

Public Questions

Ms. Meyer asked about the height of the top floor ceiling from the point to the floor. Ms. Boucher answered 9.5 feet at the highest point, overall height of the building is 34.5 feet. Ms. Meyer said she appreciates the gable end, that it's not just a basic square, but is there a way to drop the dormers lower so it's not so top-heavy. Ms. Boucher replied yes, they could be lowered a foot. Ms. Meyer asked if the flat roof is a deck for the back unit. Ms. Boucher confirmed that it is. Ms. Meyer asked if there is a headhouse for the deck. Ms. Boucher answered yes, slightly hidden in the gable.

Public Comment

Ms. Crosbie read an email received from the owner of 154 Amory Street expressing concern over the location of windows that overlook the bathroom of their home. Ms. Boucher responded that the height of those windows is high enough that there is no view into the

adjacent property. The owner of 154 Amory Street also commented that the proposed fencing may not allow the privacy that they are accustomed to.

Maria Pires of 135 Amory Street asked about parking. Ms. Boucher replied that the City of Cambridge removed parking requirements for all uses everywhere. Ms. Pires stated that parking is a major problem now, it's very difficult to find parking; people park their cars and don't move them for long periods of time.

Ms. Meyer said she knows the house on Mt. Auburn St., and it still uses the language of the surrounding houses. Ms. Litchfield asked for the address. Ms. Meyer answered that it's across from Darwins and was designed by Galante. Ms. Meyer commented that the Mt. Auburn St. house has cleaner lines. Ms. Meyer said it's hard to read the design and therefore hard to comment on it, it needs to be streamlined, and right now it doesn't hold together. The number of different materials is distracting, and the use of color to isolate different shapes is also too much. It's too complicated. She went on to say that the dormers take away from the profile of the house where you want some classic language while being modern inside.

Commission Comments

Mr. Hsiao stated that he has the same concerns as the public, it's caught between competing interests, not resolving anything, lacking a centering whole. It's trying to mitigate between traditional and modern but it's neither here nor there – be more definitive with one or the other. The gable approach should have the other elements subservient to it. The stairs are not expressed on the exterior. The massing is overextended, and the materials and colors are not helping. Just look at the massing and then it will be clearer. Right now, there is a lot of surface being applied and it's discordant, there are too many moves. There are certain elements you could build on. For example, if you use the gable, shift the dormers to make the gable dominant. The stair on the left is not being expressed as it really is. Step back and look at it more fundamentally, the massing and urban response, consider dominant and secondary moves. This will determine the treatment of the facades, fenestration, etc. There is no cohesive move yet. You are not encumbered, which can be more difficult. How do you make something cohesive out of all these parts?

Ms. Litchfield agreed with Mr. Hsiao and stated that she can't focus her eye on anything in terms of design with the use of so many materials and colors. She said to look at 140 Mt. Auburn Street that looks like a cohesive whole and that you can draw from this design. She observed that this house has a front gable, but it has one material sheathing it, there's orderly fenestration on the front, a nod to both modern and historic. Ms. Litchfield also explained that the shed dormers are the least preferred by the Commission and only approved when lowered from the ridgeline and further away from the gable end. Right now, the gable looks pasted on. She went on to say that she thinks you can pull away from the overdone boxy look but with less going on, there are so many ins and outs that are unsettling to the eye.

Ms. Pauli agreed with all the comments, stating that there are too many things happening to a relatively small building. She explained that the overall volume could work, the size does not bother her, but the front and back could be more similar. It needs to be simpler and more coherent.

Ms. Hakuta said she agreed with the commissioner's comments and had no additional comments.

Mr. Hsiao commented that perhaps there isn't a gable end, just a three-story mass in the front and two-story house in the back. Don't hide the three-story mass and express what it is as a possible approach, but make it appear lighter. Triple deckers have porches that mitigate the boxiness. You're constraining yourself to contort this. Embrace it as contemporary. This could lead to something different and fresh, but I don't know where this will go. Right now, it's not working.

Ms. Litchfield commented that one way to give a nod to the neighborhood is the use of materials, one per house or one material and two colors and said that Hardieplank will make it look less historic. She pointed out the use of shingles at the Mt. Auburn St house and noted that recent house sheathing styles already look dated.

Mr. Hsiao suggested also looking at what could make this project truly sustainable, possibly a passive house. Sustainability is a bigger driver these days and this could be a good opportunity. He also stated that limiting the choice of materials is a good idea.

Mr. Senne thanked the Commission for the feedback and stated that they have thought a lot of the issues that the Commission raised. It's the most challenging site from a zoning perspective which influenced the direction they went in. There are a couple of ideas they did talk about and could come back with them.

Ms. Boucher agreed and reiterated that this is a multiplane driven house and that these difficulties affected the design, and they'll go back to figure out how to calm it down, create more cohesiveness, and will look at materials and sustainability opportunities.

Mr. Hsiao suggested they step back and go about it a different way and figure out what they can really stand behind, don't be afraid of these challenges. Turn them into opportunities, go back to your initial sense and don't be afraid of coming forward with it if you really believe in this design. But what can you really stand behind? Don't second guess yourself. He also stated that showing alternate strategies is also helpful or show other projects that speak to you.

Kelly noted that there were other concepts considered prior to finishing this scheme, emphasizing that this is the hardest zoning problem she's ever had. She said it's tricky but they will make it work.

Ms. Litchfield motioned to continue the hearing. Ms. Hakuta seconded, and the motion passed 4-0.

Case MC-6691: 1591 Cambridge Street, by City of Cambridge. Construct temporary fire station.

Ms. Crosbie introduced the project explaining that although the proposed structure is temporary, it will be up for a minimum of three years and given the scale and change to the neighborhood, the project should be reviewed by the Commission. She also informed the Commission that it is a binding review because the structure is a City-owned structure, although the property is being leased from Spaulding Hospital.

Architect Ted Galante gave an overview of the project, explaining the renovations to the main Fire Station that necessitate the construction of a temporary facility for at least three years. He then described the project comprising prefabricated structures for the fire station and dormitory, and a connector between the two structures, and presented slides of the project including floor plans, elevations, and 3-d views, and further explained the modular prefabricated structures and how they function.

Commission Questions

Ms. Litchfield asked for confirmation that the structures will be removed once the renovations are completed and that trees will be planted to replace the ones that were removed. Mr. Galante confirmed and stated that the City is very keen to replace the trees.

Ms. Pauli asked if the site would return to functioning as a parking lot. Mr. Galante responded that he thinks so, he is not aware that Spaulding, the property owner, has any other plans for the site. He also explained that they will be returning the site to what it is today.

Ms. Litchfield asked if Spaulding might retain the structures. Mr. Galante answered that Spaulding does not own the structures.

Ms. Pauli asked how level is the site. Mr. Galante answered that it is not entirely level, there will be some grading work to accommodate the apparatus bay which is 16 inches above ground.

Ms. Pauli also asked about the air conditioners that appear to be all over the wall. Mr. Galante replied that these systems can't really be adjusted, which is unfortunate.

Mr. Hsiao asked about the drawing patterns, the horizontal and vertical lines. Mr. Galante answered that the striations are constructability lines, so they can't be modified.

Mr. Hsiao asked if they have control over the color choices. Mr. Galante said they have some control.

Ms. Hakuta asked if the red color is a requirement. Mr. Galante responded that the Fire Department chose the color.

Public Questions and Comments – none

Commission Comments

Mr. Hsiao remarked that he understands this project adheres to the needs and requirements of the Fire Department, and that this is a very clear, tectonic expression but perhaps it could be further simplified, become more monolithic - you have two simple masses with a connector, it could be even more reductive. He also suggested eliminating the linework and stripping it down further to become more elemental and consider making the whole fire station red and a different color for the other building, and maybe make the signage pop. Mr. Galante said he appreciated the suggestions and could look at this approach.

Ms. Hakuta observed that the red doors suggest a certain brand of storage facility, and she also asked about the signage. Mr. Galante answered that there is limited signage on the front of the building. Mr. Hsiao suggested making the whole thing monolithic and having the signage run over the length of the bay.

Ms. Litchfield motioned to approve the application as submitted with the recommendations to further simplify the massing to a more monolithic appearance and to consider using red color more extensively. Ms. Hakuta seconded, and the motion passed 4-0.

The April 4, 2023 minutes were approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:05 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Allison A. Crosbie, Preservation Administrator

Members of the Public Present on May 1, 2023**Panelists:**

Matthew Macchi, architect

Jason Savage

Kelly Boucher, architect

Bill Senne 142 Amory St.

Steven Greenberg

Kevin O'Leary, 106 Hancock St.

Ted Galante, architect

Brendon Roy

Gloucester, MA

303 Harvard Street

Somerville, MA

Somerville

106 Hancock Street

Smartroof Capital

146 Mt. Auburn Street

City of Cambridge, DPW

Attendees:

Marilee Meyer

Wesley Wong

Marc Levy

Maria Pires

Jim Perrine

10 Dana Street

Armory Street

3 Potter Park

135 Amory Street

1588 Cambridge Street