

**Testimony of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society before the DC Historic Preservation
Review Board January 28, 2016
HPA 15-150 418-426 C Street, NE**

My name is Beth Purcell and I am testifying on behalf of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society's Historic Preservation Committee. Thank you for letting us share our views on this project. The Historic Preservation Committee of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society reviewed the plans dated December 15, 2015 and revised plans dated January 14, 2016.

These five rowhouses, designed in 1892 by Charles Gessford, one of Capitol Hill's best-known architects, are some of the most important buildings on the northern edge of Stanton Square, with attractive alternating round and square bays. In recent years the buildings were used as small offices. Interior framing was changed or removed in inappropriate and unsafe ways. The applicant proposes to restore the buildings as single-family residences (probably condominiums), and incorporating a new addition of approximately 10 feet in the rear.

The applicant proposes to use the existing vestibule doors as the front doors to the houses, replacing the iron gates in the entranceways. However, the applicant proposes to demolish the weather vestibule in the front of the house. These vestibules, often decorated with attractive ceramic tile, and visible from the exterior, are important features. We urge the applicant to study retaining and restoring these weather vestibules.

The proposed rear elevation in the December plans was unlike the front or the existing rear elevation, with its alternating projecting and receding walls. In our earlier comments we stated that the new rear elevation looks like the rear of an apartment building. We suggested some modification to the design, to emphasize the discrete units and the party wall, perhaps a slight projection or change in the brick pattern. The revised plans more clearly delineate the five units. At the penthouse level, we suggested some delineation in the center units, as was done with the end units.

The applicant plans to locate the water meters in basement closets in the rear of the additions, and is studying placing the gas meters there as well. The electric meters are located in the front; we urge the applicant to move them to the rear of the building as well. The carriage house on the property would be retained.

The applicant proposes roof decks and penthouses, pulled back from the front. The height of roof structures is limited, and is further reduced in the revised plans. The sight-line studies, based on a six-foot height, indicate that these elements will not be visible from across C Street or near the center of Stanton Park. However, the staff report states that these elements will be visible from Massachusetts and Maryland avenues, and recommends that the concept be approved, but find the penthouses and railings are incompatible with the Capitol Hill Historic District due to their visibility. Our committee members have differing views on the penthouses and decks:

(1) Some committee members believe that the penthouses and roof decks are not compatible. The visibility studies and sightlines that the architect showed us were only in front of the project in the northwest quadrant of the park. Those studies did not reflect the fact that there is a very large amount of public space from which the penthouses will be visible. The Comprehensive Plan on Historic Preservation aims to "protect and enhance the views and vistas, both natural and designed" and to "protect the generous open space and reciprocal views of the L'Enfant Plan streets, avenues, and reservations." This roof deck is problematic because of the view from a large public park, Maryland and Massachusetts avenues, and elsewhere.

When we reviewed the penthouse project at 146th 13th Street SE (HPA 15-127), we asked for guidance. The HPRB May 28 and June 4, 2015 report on 146 13th Street SE states the Board found that "the penthouse access structure was not compatible based on its visibility. Vote: 6-1." For the 418-426 C Street project, the combination of visibility from Maryland and Massachusetts avenues, C Street, 5th Street and Stanton Park combine to make this proposed penthouse structure much more visible from public space than was the structure at 146 13th Street, SE.

(2) On the other hand, some committee members believe that the penthouses and roof decks are compatible. These rowhouses face Stanton Park and not Maryland or Massachusetts avenues. To have a view angle from Massachusetts Avenue you have to go to the intersection of 4th and Massachusetts. At that intersection, the rowhouses at the corner block the view of any set back penthouses on the applicant's project. Likewise, to get a view angle from Maryland Avenue, you have to go the intersection of 6th and Maryland. There you have a whole block of buildings including Amy Weinstein's building on the corner of 6th and Maryland blocking any possible views of the penthouses on this project.

Generally we support projects without roof decks and associated penthouses. However, we very much appreciate the return of these C-2-A-zoned properties to residential uses, and given the rear yard use for parking, there is no other outdoor space. (However, others counter that there is a large public park across the street.) Given that, we believe that the roof decks are reasonable and compatible. A related precedent may be 1122 East Capitol Street, NE (HPA 14-463, approved on the consent calendar on July 24, 2014). This project was a small (200 square-foot) two-story addition clad in fiber-cement board to a two-story rowhouse. The staff report noted that "The property abuts a service alley which provides views of the rear of the building from 12th Street." and that "The proposal's scale, massing, materials, and fenestration are compatible with the subject property, its context, and the character of the historic district." CHRS argued that while the addition was compatible, because it was visible from 12th Street, NE, a major street, the materials used on the rear addition should be red brick or other materials matching the color of existing alley buildings. The staff report did not adopt our recommendation, and the project was approved. Although HPA-14-463 involved a two-story addition shorter than the proposed roof decks above a three-story building, it does concern visibility from a major street.

We believe that the project may be consistent with the Capitol Hill Historic District.

Thank you for considering our comments.

