

## STREETSCAPE SPACES

*by Nancy Metzger*

When considering the nature of urban places, it is common to focus almost exclusively on the buildings lining a street or framing an open space. The description of these places typically includes a discussion of the style, size, form and materials of the buildings. Not surprisingly, this is also the format that many of Washington's historic district nomination forms follow. For instance, the 1976 documentation<sup>i</sup> for the Capitol Hill Historic District follows this pattern by noting: "... almost every street is composed of rowhouses of different varieties and periods forming a continuous wall broken only by street intersections. Side by side exist early nineteenth century manor houses, Federal townhouses, small frame dwellings, ornate Italianate bracketed houses, and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century press brick rowhouses with their often whimsical decorative elements combining Richardsonian Romanesque, Queen Anne and Eastlavian motifs."<sup>ii</sup> That description does not include the many open spaces closely associated with those row houses. This paper considers the quite varied open spaces surrounding buildings to be of significance, worthy of preservation and careful consideration in the approval process.

The description in the Capitol Hill Historic District designation document provides only a snapshot of the architectural nature of the Capitol Hill Historic District. However Larry R. Ford in his book The Spaces Between Buildings,<sup>iii</sup> argues that scholars, critics, and others pay very little attention to the more ordinary spaces *around* buildings that are often significant in the way that urban places are perceived and experienced. As a result of that oversight the buildings they describe are divorced from the context around them. These spaces would include those in front of buildings lining up along a street, meeting to form open squares, ovals, or circles for parks and other civic uses as well as the different openings that allow interaction between fronts and backs of buildings. While Ford concentrates on the urban design and functioning of such spaces, his observations are equally germane when considering the buildings and streetscapes of historic districts. The above description in the Capitol Hill Historic District nomination confirms Ford's observation about the neglect of spaces as those surrounding some buildings are simply not mentioned in the document, even the fairly large ones surrounding churches and large houses. (The L'Enfant plan, particularly the large number of broad avenues that cut through the historic district which allow for deep front yards, is the notable exception.)



600 Block East Capitol  
Street, NE

If one were to graphically present a rowhouse streetscape, the easiest way it could be done would be to line up blocks (representing buildings) or rectangles (if presented on paper), one touching the other, allow a significant space for a street after a set number of blocks, and then start the line of blocks again. Another line of blocks could be added perpendicular to the first, etc. until the representation of an entire neighborhood is formed. The volume of such streetscapes would be seen only through the roof shapes and perhaps the end units, depending on whether another line is placed to form a closed angle or a back yard (open space). The design and details of the front façade would contribute most to the expression of the streetscape. Most likely the houses in such a streetscape would be built at the same time or within an

area with well-defined building codes. There are many such streetscapes, both historic and contemporary, that fit this pattern.

A more subtle rowhouse streetscape is one in which a majority of the houses also line up immediately next to its neighbors but there are spaces other than street or other transportation-related intersections (such as alleys or driveways) that also become part of the streetscape. There are spaces that are encompassed within buildings while others, ranging in width from a foot or less to generous side yards of 20' or more, are between buildings. The design and detail of the front facades and the heights of individual buildings still provide the most obvious expression of the streetscape but the lesser spaces contribute a visual richness to the streetscape by allowing a greater variety of roof shapes, side wall materials, and architectural details to be seen as well as for an expansion of garden space and the opportunity to move between the front and back of a building. While this more subtle form of rowhouse neighborhood is not usually a pattern in contemporary developments, it is seen in historic neighborhoods, particularly those built over many decades as such neighborhoods reflect different development pressures, building traditions and changing regulations.

### ***Considering Capitol Hill's Open Spaces***



109-131 C Street, SE

By using Capitol Hill's rowhouse streetscapes as examples, one can look at over 200 years of one neighborhood's development to consider the types and significance of the spaces within a streetscape.<sup>iv</sup> Rows such as 109 – 131 C Street SE or the 300 block of E Street SE have all the attributes of the prototypical rowhouse neighborhood mentioned above – rows of buildings abutting each other, separated from other houses only by a street or alley. These two examples also have stylistically consistent facades which help to make an even stronger visual streetscape panorama or "wall".

The 1840s row (left) behind the Madison Building of the Library of Congress is designed in a flat-front early Italianate style while the E Street houses (right) were developed in the porch-front neo-Federal style that became popular in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



300 Block E Street, SE

It is impossible to consider Capitol Hill streetscapes without acknowledging the role of the Parking Act of 1870 in creating a band of garden space between the public sidewalk and the property line, which usually runs along the front façade of a building, excluding such features as bays and porches. Reflecting the growing interest at that time in creating parks and green space in urban areas, Washington combined that city beautification effort with a financial need to reduce the amount of paving for streets and thereby gained linear parks along its residential streets. Today this space is often referred to as "parked space" to lessen confusion with "parking" which was the term commonly used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>v</sup> As noted in the Capitol Hill Historic District nomination form: "Today, through a series of ordinances passed in the nineteenth century, the 160 foot width of the Avenues and the approximately 90 foot width of the grid streets have been achieved by 'parking', the open space on either side of an approximately 50 foot roadway. ... There are more grand 160 foot wide avenues in the

Capitol Hill area than elsewhere in the city, and these avenues lend a stately and monumental dignity to the Historic District.<sup>vi</sup> The dual band of green park and building facades weaves throughout the historic district, expanding and contracting depending on street width and use.

A notable variation in the typical placement of a building along the property line is when



317-321 East Capitol Street, SE

buildings are set back by 5' - 20' from the property line, thus providing for even more richness along the streetscape facade.<sup>vii</sup> Most of these houses were built during or before the Civil War and there has been speculation about why builders would choose that particular pattern. Added protection against dust and noise from unpaved city streets is the most commonly assumed explanation. In some cases the siting appears to be a preference to take advantage of a hilltop location (catching breezes and views) or at least to avoid massive amounts of digging out a site or locating much of the house below grade while other houses are at grade.



415-417 7th Street, SE

Perhaps the most subtle variation of spaces within a rowhouse streetscape involves those buildings that incorporate a space or break within the building itself (termed a “pass-through” in this paper) as seen in these houses in the 400 and 500 blocks of 7th Street, SE. The pass-through with the arch at 415 - 417 7th Street is a particularly dignified example of this fundamentally utilitarian feature that once

allowed an owner to carry coal to the back yard and move trash and household waste to the front for disposal without carrying it through the house. The two frame houses at 520 and 522 7th Street SE share a simpler version. About half of the squares in the Capitol Hill Historic District do not have alleys (although some of those do have pedestrian-only paths) so an architectural feature that would allow for transporting messy materials between front and back would be a desirable feature. Today they are still a welcome feature for moving dirty cargo -- mulch and bags



520-522 7th Street, SE

of charcoal instead of coal, for instance. These pass-throughs also help to visually define the size and shape of individual buildings which enrich both the streetscape and the individual facades. Many pedestrians would also count the view, however fleeting, through the opening into the back gardens as a welcome addition to the streetscape. Because row houses are no longer built with this feature, it is an intriguing detail for many passersby to consider and provides a

visual declaration of the historic nature of the neighborhood and the building.



503-505 6th Street, SE

Before the Civil War, most of Capitol Hill’s houses were built singly or in small groups, likely because the houses were built by an owner-resident or by small-scale investors/speculators. During this time period a number of “duplex” houses, often frame, were built with side yards. Instead of three 16’-wide houses

on a 50’-wide lot, for example, the lot might have been subdivided into two 25’-wide lots each with a house 17’-18’ wide along the center lot line and 7’ - 8’ wide side yards to the right and left of the adjoining houses similar to the houses at 503 - 505 Sixth Street SE. (In this case the house on the left has a larger side garden.) Functionally the houses would gain more

light, air and secondary access; additionally the extra width between the two houses and the next house could also serve to delay the spread of fire.



614 E Street, SE

A variation to this pattern of a building and a side space would be a situation where it appears that a strip of land is “left over” on the lot after a house is built. When such a strip is less than 3’ wide, these strips do indeed look “left over” and it is something of a puzzle why a builder would not have extended the house to both lot lines as the space is difficult to use either for maintenance or transporting messy materials and is not really useful as a firebreak. Sometimes it seems there must have been a surveyor’s mistake or some other miscalculation to account for such

circumstances. The house at 614 E Street is an example of such a situation and a previous owner installed an umbrella-like cover over the "slit" to mitigate some of the effects of weather on the siding.



619 G Street, SE

When the space is wider than 3’, the side yard is better suited for all the functions it originally provided – staging ground for maintenance work, passage between front and back yards, increased light and air, and protection against fire spreading (although modern fire departments and building materials obviously now offer much better protection). Even more so than the pass-through within two houses, the wider side yard allows for a better definition of the house form, size and materials.

Additionally, in many cases, it allows for a visual continuity between the parked space in the front and the garden space in the rear and the opportunity for an increased amount of pervious surface.



712 East Capitol, NE

Side yards of 3’ – 10’ may be the most common size in the historic district but there are a number of houses with yards of even more generous dimensions. It is clear that the house at 712 East Capitol Street NE, connected on the left with its neighbor, was built with the large side garden on the right side as an integral part of the house design as it is

sited to one side of the lot. An architect-designed porch faces the side garden which also provides a continuation of the front parked space. This pattern is also found in the earlier house at 804 East Capitol Street NE where similar fencing between the house and its neighbor on the right visually merges the side yards of the two houses and provides generous light and air to the interior of both .



804 East Capitol, NE (middle)



The Maples Development

Capitol Hill has relatively few houses that were built as stand-alone houses in forms and styles that are clearly meant for both side facades to be viewed, even though they are simpler than the front façade. The 1795 manor house, known as the Maples (two-story center section) is a very good example of this type. The original setting of the Maples in the



600 block of South Carolina Avenue, SE, included outbuildings, woods, and gardens that encompassed the entire square but owners gradually sold off land as interest in agriculture and family fortunes declined. Recent renovation and new construction work at the Maples has maintained the center lawn that has been a feature of the landmark for two centuries.

**Responses to Proposed Additions** Another aspect of the consideration of open spaces associated with rowhouses of Capitol Hill is historic preservation's response to those spaces, particularly in conjunction with zoning regulations. The unique response of 19<sup>th</sup> century Washington to the wide



301 Pennsylvania Ave., SE

L'Enfant streets that established the public/private garden or parked space in the front of buildings is fully recognized as a character-defining feature of the historic district. Limitations are placed on the amount of hardscaping allowed on parked space although in some instances, particularly on commercial streets, the parked space has long been taken over by increased road and sidewalk widths.<sup>viii</sup> Proposed incursions such as driveways and parking pads have been denied and those denials upheld in rulings by the Mayor's Agent. Garden spaces are

found even at some locations where a commercial space, associated with wider sidewalks that negate the possibility of green space, wraps around a corner onto a residential area as seen in the garden space at 301 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE. These open garden spaces were maintained, at least in part through the historic preservation process, even though some commercial uses have been allowed in conjunction with the parked space.



222 11th Street, NE

Front facades of historic buildings are also generally protected from new additions, even if the addition would not be on the public parked area as such an addition would typically cover most or all of the character-defining facade. Although the Historic Preservation Guidelines on Additions make no mention of the buildings with additional setbacks from the public

space, obviously that space cannot be built upon without altering the facade. Even tall fences erected on the property line obscure the front facade. The wall at 222 Eleventh Street NE obscures not only the front facade but also the side porch and generous side yard.

Unfortunately, the spaces between or within buildings often do not receive protection similar to front "open" spaces because they have largely been perceived as empty spaces that interrupt the streetscape panorama or "wall". These spaces are threatened even more by current zoning regulations. At the present time, a house that is connected to another building on only one side is considered by zoning to be a semi-detached house, which is allowed to cover only 40% of the lot rather than 60% that would be granted automatically if it were a building attached on both sides. Moreover zoning regulations count the unoccupied space of a side yard (if less than 8') as if it were already covered land when totaling lot coverage so owners have a double incentive to propose side additions to make use of the land already included in the lot coverage. In the past, given the additional burden owners would bear in zoning terms if denied a side addition and forced to make a rear addition that might not be

possible under the zoning regulations, the HPRB has often found it difficult to deny a side addition altogether. Thus, some of these spaces have been closed off or filled in.<sup>ix</sup>

In historic preservation terms, the side additions that have been allowed have had negative impacts:

1. The historic setting of at least two buildings has been permanently altered, often visibly.
2. Side elevations, in addition to being obscured by an addition, have been pierced by openings, sometimes many in number and/or large in size, often resulting in a significant loss of historic fabric, particularly when combined with a rear addition or alterations of rear elevations that allow for larger windows and/or French doors, etc.
3. Dog legs, court yards, and side spaces -- examples of historic sustainable features -- allowed light and air into houses. Loss of these spaces during renovations often means not only a loss of permeable space (or potential permeable space) but also likely increases in energy demands as light and air are available only at two increasingly remote ends -- front and rear.
4. The architectural streetscape has become more one-dimensional -- a simple row of facades rather than one with the richness of volume and spaces as well as variety of facades.
5. The story of the historic development of the individual building, street, and historic district is obscured. The open space was quite often the result of a deliberate choice by the owner of the building regarding placement on the site and the uses to be accomplished. In most cases these spaces should not be seen as dispensable -- open space that should be filled in to complete the development pattern of a neighborhood or avoid a hole in the streetscape "wall". They are instead a reflection of the times in which the building was constructed. Many of these spaces have been a part of the neighborhood for over 150 years.

### ***A Closer Look at Neighborhood Cases***

It is helpful to take a look at cases that have resulted in the infill of these spaces and the impact of these additions on the buildings and the historic district as well as at cases where the historic space has been maintained.

#### **Houses with very narrow side yards:**



I Street, SE 700 Block

Early 19th century house (left) with narrow side passageway now filled with flat-roof addition held near front of building where it becomes another element and confusing artifact. Addition used for closet space.



538 6th Street SE

Frame house originally with very narrow side space beyond bay; during renovation a fill-in strip was allowed because of maintenance difficulties but held back from bay corner so the original bay configuration was more apparent.



608 and 610 E Street, SE

Houses originally separated by a narrow passageway that was spanned on the second floor by a bathroom extension. Ground level remains open.

### **Houses with side yards approximately 3' – 10' wide**



621 G Street SE

Two very early frame houses (c. 1810) that originally were typical row house size and orientation, each with side yards. Modified in 1960s to be two units (ground and second floor) and now is single-family residence. Recent rear addition was designed so there is limited visibility from G Street.



723 & 727 10th Street, SE

These two Civil War-era houses have their side yards together, creating a large green space between them rather than on the outside of the houses as is more common pattern seen above.



810 - 812 G Street, SE

Neighboring side passageways provide rear yard access for both houses and because of the larger width, allow forms and details of different style houses to be more visible.



816 G Street, SE

Small, one-story addition at rear (date unknown) of early frame house functions as an entry and allows form and size of historic building to remain dominant.



905 G Street, SE



905 G Street, SE

Side passageway was filled with two-story addition (at right) set approximately 18" behind original house. Two views show depth of set back of new construction at right and impact of construction on facade (left). The inappropriate windows were installed during an earlier renovation.



515 5th Street, SE

Renovation with rear addition did not close side passage but provided link between front public space and rear garden.





615 E Street, SE

Side addition was allowed in review process but held back approximately 20' to allow form of early house to remain visible. Landscaped courtyard is behind fence.



705 D Street, SE

Gazebo-style structure at end of long side passage provides garden view to this commercial property.

### Side yards larger than 10'



114 Third Street, SE

Side addition held to one story in review process and is behind fence so that visibility of addition from Third Street is minimized and historic setting maintained while allowing for expansion.



New rear addition was approved for this early landmark house at 224 Second Street, SE; side yard remains open as it was considered an important feature of this house. Rear addition limited so that it would not intrude excessively on house and setting. Garden setting will be established to maintain feeling.



701 6th Street, SE

This Civil War-era home appears to be in the center of a large lot, however only the garden on the right is part of the lot. The left garden is actually parked space along G Street. Additions are in rear and facing G Street.



805 East Capitol Street, SE

Side addition fills the end of the driveway (pre-existing) although car is parked on public space. Open drive, reduced landscaping and large entry doors all emphasize addition and serve to diminish the historic house.



311 11th Street, NE

Small house, approximately 15' wide, is enhanced by side yard of same width.



400 block 11th Street, NE

Steep hillside and large trees show the historic nature of the side garden, important to the house as rear of building is limited to rear porch and alley garages

### **Houses with Additional Front Set-Backs**



531 7th Street, SE

Early frame house set back substantially from Seventh Street. Side passage allows a view to back of lot and an understanding of original topography as alley can be approximately 10' above height of Seventh Street.



Two pre-Civil War houses (c. 1850) stand on top of hill about 7' above G Street SE. House on left, the birthplace of John Philip Sousa, is on the front and side property lines and was "federalized" in the early 1960s. House on right, with 6' side passage and set back 20' from front property line, was modified in 1887 when the second floor was raised to full height and a new façade added.

636-638 G Street, SE



416 6th Street, SE

House at the corner of Sixth Street and South Carolina Avenue, SE, uses Sixth Street as entry and the side garden is an open space. South Carolina Avenue side is landscaped for more private space. The corner lot and public space extends the amount of green space surrounding the home.

### ***Impact of Infill***

Because buildings are a part of their individual settings and the streetscape panorama, it is important to consider the entire setting, including the "open space" that surrounds them. Certainly a historic front facade of a row house is rarely, if ever, allowed to be altered by a front addition even when there is a deep setback from the property line and that is the only space available for expansion. A side addition to a semi-detached building should receive equally careful scrutiny because such additions, when placed

near the front, alter the physical perception of one or two buildings as well as the development history of the house and district. Over the decades many such space have been lost and the ones that remain carry greater significance. Many of these spaces are original or have been part of the Capitol Hill streetscape for far more than 150 years. They can rightfully be considered to have a significance on their own just as certain additions or elements (such as iron fences or stairs, cornices or window hoods installed during earlier "modernizations") are considered to be significant even though these are acknowledged as not a part of the original building. In light of the proposed easing of zoning regulations, now is a reasonable time to assess the impact of side additions on historic buildings and streetscapes and acknowledge the role and qualities that open space contributes to the historic district.

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<sup>i</sup> The documentation for the Capitol Hill Historic District was amended in 2002 to include a boundary expansion and in 2003 to extend the period of significance from 1795 to 1945.

<sup>ii</sup> See Item # 7 - Description of *National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Capitol Hill Historic District*, 1976. Prepared by Joint District of Columbia National Capital Planning Commission Historic Preservation Office.

<sup>iii</sup> Larry R. Ford, *The Spaces Between Buildings*, Johns Hopkins University Press, July 2000.

<sup>iv</sup> Capitol Hill's alleys and alleyscapes are also significant within the historic district and while not addressed in the nomination have recently been surveyed in the Historic Preservation Office Alley Survey.

<sup>v</sup> See pp 4 – 5, "Landscaping, Landscape Features and Secondary Buildings in Historic Districts," DC Office of Planning Historic Preservation Office, 2010 updated. Also pp 1-2, "Yours, Mine and Ours", Capitol Hill Restoration Society Historic District Guidelines, 1996.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Capitol Hill Historic District.

<sup>vii</sup> It is interesting to note that George Washington's first building regulations allowed buildings to be either at or behind the property line.

<sup>viii</sup> The importance of this parked space is also acknowledged by DC's Department of Transportation through a review by its Public Space Committee.

<sup>ix</sup> As of September 2014, the proposed Zoning Rewrite Draft would allow all buildings in R-4 zones to have 60% lot coverage. In addition, there would be no minimum width required of the side yard or open court.