

**Testimony of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society before the DC Historic  
Preservation Review Board on June 2, 2022  
227-229 Massachusetts Avenue, NE HPA 22-281**

My name is Beth Purcell and I am testifying on behalf of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society's Historic Preservation Committee. We met online with the project architects and reviewed the plans for the project dated June 3, 2021.

Hillsdale College owns seven buildings on Massachusetts Avenue, NE: 227, 229 and 231 (three story brick bay fronts built in 1892), 233-235 (1857), 237 (1915), and 239 (1887). These are contributing buildings. To further its mission, the college proposes changes to the plaza, facades, entrances, a new brick wall at the street front. An earlier version of the project was filed in HPA 21-423, which was eventually referred to staff. Current submission focuses on changes to 1892 brick bay fronts (currently labeled 227 Massachusetts Ave) and the plaza design.

The applicant proposes to create a primary street-level entrance at middle of the three rowhouses of 227 Massachusetts Avenue. These three rowhouses each have an original second story entrance, reached by metal stairs. (They were likely the first story entrances with the ground floor/basement below.) Please see Figure 1. HPO's *Door Repair and Replacement Preservation and Design Guidelines* provides:

2.7 Expanding or reducing the size of door openings, blocking up, or creating new openings on primary elevations of historic buildings is not appropriate. Flexibility to this principle may be applied for basement door openings located under stairs or otherwise not prominently visible from public view.<sup>1</sup>

While these stairs are not the original 1892 construction they serve the original function as entries to these historic row houses. The applicant seeks a more institutional appearance and proposes to remove all three metal stairs, and in the process, abandon the original second story entrances, leaving them in mid-air, and

---

<sup>1</sup> HPO's *Porches and Steps on Historic Buildings* provides:

Altering Front Porches: Alterations, such as removing an existing porch roof or a portion of the porch floor, change the character of a building and are almost never appropriate.

The NPS *Standards for Rehabilitation* state:

Not Recommended: Removing or radically changing entrances and porches which are important in defining the overall historic character of the building so that, as a result, the character is diminished.

thus significantly altering perception of these historic buildings and erasing their rowhouse character. The Board has required preserving original entrances, and should do so in this case. See 201 8<sup>th</sup> Street, NE (HPA 19-104) and the Folger Shakespeare Library (HPA 19-332). We believe that all the stairs to all second story entrances should be preserved, thus preserving the memory of the original rowhouses.

Furthermore, the applicant modifies ground floor of the three row houses in manner reinforcing the central entry. New rusticated stone base and traditional looking wood and glass doors are an improvement over current stone base and modern glass doors. But the focus on central entry again obscures residential past of these buildings.

It appears that the proposed rooftop structure will be only minimally visible, and therefore a sightline study is not needed.

The existing plazas in front of the buildings have minimal green space and present a confusing circulation. They occupy the public “parking” space. The applicant plans to better organize the plazas, add green space and comply with ADA requirements. The plaza plan in HPA 21-423 remains largely unchanged. The proposed plaza emphasizes the continuity of space in front of seven original buildings, with limited marking of some original property lines. While the increased plantings, greening of the space are to be commended, we suggest reducing the amount of hardscape. But the proposed brick wall in public space adjacent to the sidewalk still looks too institutional. The effect should be softened, and made more inviting to passers-by.

We believe that at this time, the project is not compatible with the Capitol Hill Historic District, based on:

- 1) the removal of the stairs to the second story entrances, and
- 2) the institutional brick wall at the plazas.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Figure 1. Detail of one of the second story entrances, 227 Massachusetts Avenue, NE

