

Mt. Pleasant Case Denying Ramp to Elderly Couple in Historic District

This is the documented story of an elderly Mt. Pleasant couple, ages 88 and 86, who had lived in their house in Mt. Pleasant for 46 years. When they could no longer climb the stairs, they moved into their basement, which had exterior access at grade in the back, but was below grade in the front. They planned to rent out the upstairs part of the house separately, perhaps as two separate units. In 2006, the couple's son got an architect to design a ramp in the front for better basement access, especially in a fire or other emergency. Because Mt. Pleasant by this time was a historic district, the son had to seek approval from HPRB.

The Historic Preservation Office staff advised the couple that "it was, you know, essentially nearly impossible to get approval of this." Tr. 44 (see link to sources below for entire transcript of hearing). The staff recommended that the application be denied. The couple's son took their case to the Historic Preservation Review Board itself. The cost of the appeal, including extensive testimony by the architect, is not in the record. The HPRB denied the application.

As the son said to Marc Fisher of the Washington Post, "'The city chose bricks and mortar over the health and welfare of the residents.'" Or, as Fisher wrote:

"The historic preservation process tends to turn into the aesthetics police," says Jack McKay, an advisory neighborhood commissioner who showed me a series of Mount Pleasant houses where preservation proponents fought against residents who wanted to let more light into dark rowhouses, or open a doorway into their basement, or replace the neighborhood's typical concrete stairs with more attractive and expensive stone steps. "A vocal minority pushes through these historic designations and then everyone suffers the consequences."

And, as the son told Fisher:

"I wanted to get this project going while Mom and Pop are alive," he says. "But to fight the city even more would be taking money from the project to pay legal fees. It's wrong: The city needs to be reined in. People have to see that social needs are more important than architecture."

By two years later, the son had given up on the ramp, and tried to get approval for a lift instead. With his parents now 90 and 87, he was denied even this. As he told Fisher in 2008:

"Again and again, we've tried to please them, but they're intransigent," says Richard Lucas, who has had to take a large chunk of the money he'd set aside for the ramp and waste it on architects and lawyers. "Instead of a ramp, they wanted us to put in a lift, and we rewrote the plans to do that, and then they weren't satisfied with the angle of the lift. So we changed that, and then that wasn't good enough. Suddenly, it was about wheelchair maneuverability."

Finally, HUD got wind of the case and filed a complaint claiming that DC had violated anti-discrimination provisions. Settlement negotiations ensued, but it is not clear whether they reached

any result, or whether, if so, it came in time for the parents. As the son summarized in 2008:

"The whole point of this was so that my parents could enjoy the neighbors and the front of their house and get a little light," Richard Lucas says. "Now they're in declining health and the months just keep going by as the city delays and delays."

Sources:

The two Washington Post articles, the HPO staff report, a blog post on the case, and the transcript of the 2006 hearing can be found at LivingChevyChase.com/resources.

Jim Feldman