

Homeowner Submits Agency’s Own Proposal . . . But HPRB Just Says No!

Proponents of a historic district often claim that designation of a historic district does not hamper the ability of homeowners to make reasonable renovations or repairs. That is incorrect – the agency sometimes rejects even the alternatives it had itself suggested to the homeowner, as a recent case about a new basement entrance and stairway shows.

Homeowners in the Mt. Pleasant Historic District wanted to add basement stairs to their house. They submitted two proposals to HPRB – one apparently being what they actually wanted, and a second being what the agency itself described as an “HPO [Historic Preservation Office]-suggested alternative.” No one filed any objection to either alternative.

The staff report rejected both plans, because the new entrance would be visible from the street and might even “raise the tricky issue of where to conceal additional utility meters.” (HPRB imposes strict requirements on placement of utility meters.) The staff also noted that the “new entrance would require an extension of the walk which, unfortunately, had been covered with brick prior to 2004.” Walkways in historic district generally have to retain the original material (usually concrete).

The staff did note that a new rear entrance might be possible. There was no indication of the relative cost of such an entrance or whether the interior layout of the house would permit it.

Amazingly, even though the homeowners submitted a plan that HPO itself suggested and no one objected, the HPRB still rejected the application, finding that “the proposed work is not compatible with the character of the historic district, nor would it sufficiently retain the character of the subject property.”

There is no record of the time and money incurred in having an architect prepare and submit the designs for *two* proposals and the other necessary paperwork, but it is likely to have been substantial. And the result of the expenditure was . . . no dice, back to the drawing board.

Do we need to give an unelected agency control over whether and where we can add a basement entrance to our homes, or make virtually any other exterior change to our homes?

Sources:

<https://app.box.com/s/dhn9muwq7e6fqor5v5v40hn1w7yanfma/folder/228844417864> (case files)
<https://planning.dc.gov/node/1684101> (see HRPB Actions Oct. 26 and Nov. 2, 2023)

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