
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District:	Mount Pleasant Historic District	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	3228 Walbridge Place, NW	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent
Meeting Date:	October 26, 2006	<input type="checkbox"/> New construction
Case Number:	06-463	<input type="checkbox"/> Addition
Date Received:	September 8, 2006	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennee	<input type="checkbox"/> Concept

The applicant, Harold L. Sanders, architect and agent for owners Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Lucas, requests the Board's approval of a permit application to construct a front basement entrance to this 1932 rowhouse. The plans include the construction of a wheelchair ramp from the sidewalk to the new entrance and the removal of a section of the porch deck in order to accommodate passage. The application also proposes the demolition of a plywood shed and the construction of a small deck, a patio, and a parking pad in the already-paved rear yard, but these are issues that have been reviewed by staff and can be approved administratively.

As there is an existing at-grade *rear* entrance to the basement space, and the new ramp is fairly steep (19 degrees; an ADA-compliant ramp could be up to 1:12 pitch, or 4.76 degrees), it is presumably to be intended principally as (assisted) secondary emergency egress. The ramp consists of two tracks of Grasscrete or equivalent (although it is not specified on the plans), between which would be steps.

Front porches, usually full-width, are a characteristic and character-defining element on the facades of historic Mount Pleasant rowhouses. Repeating porches of similar height and depth create a notable pattern and rhythm on these formerly suburban streets. A front porch is intended to be and should remain visually "grounded" in that it is typically supported by piers connected by an apron, effectively a "skirt" concealing the building's base (in this case, the "apron" is not lattice but a solid wall, slightly recessed, and pierced by small window openings). Clearly, a full-width porch impedes the construction of such an entrance and it is only by the removal of a portion of the porch that it could be achieved. In most cases, applicants propose to remove only the apron—problematic enough—but in this instance, half of the porch deck is slated for removal too. This would be a very unfortunate, prominent alteration to a character-defining feature and reason enough to avoid or discourage such a project. We are unaware of a case in which the Board or the staff has approved such a change. Such a proposal illustrates the particular difficulty of constructing a basement entrance in such an instance, i.e., where the front yard/public space between the sidewalk and porch is so shallow (about ten feet).

Historically, Washington's typical front basement entrances consisted of a narrow, steep stair tightly winding under a projecting *stoop*. The narrow areaway for such an entrance was largely

concealed beneath and behind the main entrance stairs. Today's building codes require broader and less steep steps, equaling a longer run and greater breadth and meaning more total excavation and pavement. A ramp is even more difficult to accommodate, as it usually necessitates greater width and a longer run relative to height. While a less-than-full-width porch may admit a *stair* to be snuck around its side or end—thus reducing the stair's projection and visibility and the elimination of front-yard green space—full-width porches force most of the “hardscape” out into the front yard. The Board has previously rejected steps running under porches from the front and cases in which basement entrance steps would extend too far into front yards, swapping green space for hardscape and becoming a conspicuous feature. The Board has also rejected basement leadwalks or ramps originating at the sidewalk and running parallel to the original leadwalk, i.e., additional walks destructive of green space and admitting direct sight lines to basement entrances.

The conditions that make basement entrances the *least* compatible all obtain here: a porch extends across the entire front; the front yard is shallow; and there is nearly no rise in grade from the sidewalk to the house, making the ramp/areaway excavation very conspicuous to the passerby. The ramp would require breaking through one of the original stone retaining walls typical of Mount Pleasant. There is not even a good opportunity to screen any of the project with planting.

While intended to soften the effect of the ramp, the use of Grasscrete or a similar surface is not a sufficient response to the challenge. Its appearance leaves much to be desired, and it is often ineffective in achieving a surface that looks like lawn, particularly if the area is sloped or well used. In fact, success in growing grass here might make the surface slippery, at least when wet.

As suggested above, the removal of the section of porch and construction of the porch will expose to view the base of the house, something not intended to be exposed. The proposal calls for a large opening in the face of the building, to be filled with a window and siding. Introducing a few scraps of siding at that location is incompatible with the masonry character of the house and has a makeshift quality.

There are similar houses on both sides of this block and running around the corner on the north side of the 1900 block of Lamont.¹ It appears that only two of these houses have basement entrances. One of these is tucked under a stoop; only the other is prominently visible on the face of a building.² It appears that these were constructed prior to the establishment of the historic district. It was clearly the case that at one time, such retrofitted entrances were much less common. Today, however, the number of basement apartments has grown greatly and has the number of front basement entrance proposals with them. Whereas the problem of appearing to encourage or condone entrances under full porches may have once been merely theoretical, today it is very real. While a property owner may consider a single instance of such an entrance to be pardonable in the context of an otherwise mostly intact block—especially for a good cause or unique circumstance—the Board must act consistently and render decisions that are generalizable to all similar properties.

The staff recommends that the Board deny a permit for a basement entrance and ramp at front, but the other work in the rear yard may be approved by the Board or staff.

¹ They were developed by the Harvard Terrace Development Corporation in 1932-1933.

² And the more visible of the two is on the east side of the street, where the homes are atop a higher grade and set back further from the observer on the street.