

Historic Preservation: architecture versus human needs

Since 1987, Mount Pleasant has been designated a "historic district", which adds volumes of regulations to any construction or modification of our houses. This came about after some unfortunately modern-style construction (see the garages at the corner of 18th and Park Road), and it's nice to have some control over neighborhood architecture. But these regulations can be excessively restrictive, too, placing details of architecture over serious human needs.

In October, 2006, the Historic Preservation Review Board approved, by a 9 to 1 vote, the staff recommendation that a "basement entrance and ramp" at 3228 Walbridge Place not be allowed. I found out about this in a conversation with one of our Historic Mount Pleasant people, who mentioned that the residents wanted the ramp because they had become too old to manage stairs, and were now living in their basement.

That struck me as a wrong-headed decision: human needs ought to come first, and if elderly residents need a front entrance and ramp because they can no longer manage the stairs in front of their house, then they should be allowed to have them. Growing old is a grim business, and we owe it to our elderly residents to make their last years as comfortable as possible. As my wife said when I told her of this Historic Preservation denial, "that's terrible!"

I contacted the residents, Cornelius and Merrie Lucas, and confirmed their need for a front exit and ramp for their basement home. The need



This is the Walbridge Place row, the red steps marking the location in dispute. Is this pattern of repeating porches and steps more important than the safety and comfort of elderly residents?

was even more dire than I had thought: confined to their basement by the disabilities of old age (he is 88, she is 86, and she's crippled by strokes), their only exit is through the back door, out to the alley. Should that be blocked -- and their kitchen, the most likely point of origin for a fire, is right next to that back door -- they would have no way out of their basement. Two exits are required for basement apartments, for safety. This basement has only one, and the front "entrance" is needed primarily as an emergency exit.

Why the denial? The design for the house, done by their son, Richard, didn't call for removal of the front porch, only an opening of one portion of it, to provide head clearance for anyone exiting via that ramp. A tiny (15 inches) stone wall would have to be removed. The porch, and the front steps, would remain in place. But this was too much for the Historic Preservation Office, which complained that the removal of half of the porch deck "would be a very unfortunate, prominent alteration to a character-defining feature". Hence the denial of the permit.

I think that's wrong, putting a detail of architecture over a serious human need. The Lucases should be allowed to have their front emergency exit, and the ramp, to make that exit accessible to Mrs Lucas and her walker, or in a wheelchair, assisted by her husband or their nurse. Does this mar the "repeating porches of similar height and depth [which] create a notable pattern and rhythm on these formerly suburban streets"? If so, too bad; my priority is people, not the elegance of architecture. As is evident from the photograph, this row is not so beautiful that changes must be prevented, at the expense of



Cornelius Lucas, 88, and in the background, Merrie Lucas, 86. Who could be so hard-hearted as to deny these people a bit of comfort and safety in their last years?

the safety and comfort of the residents.

I made a bit of noise about this, which attracted the attention of Marc Fisher, Metro columnist for the Washington Post. I arranged for him to visit the Lucas residence on December 15. Marc "got it", in spades. On the 21st, his column on the matter appeared, given very prominent play on the front page of the Metro section. There was utterly no doubt of where his sympathies lie. Who could be so callous as to deny the requests of old Cornelius Lucas, World War II veteran, and his wife Merrie, a retired nurse?

[Marc's column](#) has gotten a lot of attention, as people are abruptly made aware of the unintended consequences of historic preservation. Fay Armstrong, president of Historic Mount Pleasant (which supported the permit denial), observed that the preservation rules do not provide for exceptions in cases of disability. That's a terrible omission. People ought to be able to make whatever changes are necessary to compensate for disabilities due to injury or age. And there ought to be an appeal process for Historic Preservation decisions, and those appeals should be judged by people whose priority is human needs, not merely architectural style.

I'm certain that the Lucases will get their front entrance and ramp, as Marc's column has brought them some heavy-duty legal assistance, lawyers eager to take on the Historic Preservation Office. Beyond that, I'm hoping that our District Council will take action to put provisions in the historic preservation law so that those regulations can be overridden where human needs warrant.

January 2008: [another Marc Fisher column](#), and an [update on the Walbridge Place situation](#).

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December 29, 2006