

We Don't Have A Tear-Down Problem

Historic District advocates claim that historic designation is the only way to prevent smaller houses from being torn down and replaced with houses that they view as too big and “unaffordable” - McMansions – or houses that are somehow too small and presumably too “affordable” – duplexes – or houses they view as incompatible in architectural style or scale. There are many problems with this argument but the most obvious is that this is a solution in search of a problem: first, there are no “affordable” houses in Chevy Chase DC – none – so that aspect of “preservation” cannot apply, and second, we have had hardly any house replacements in the proposed historic district. While tastes can and do differ, especially in a neighborhood with a diverse housing stock, the replacements and additions range from innocuous to nice looking, so there have not been many complaints about the replacement houses. Our neighborhood’s eclectic architectural character is indeed tweaked ever so slightly, every once in a while — but it remains charming.

See for yourself.

Here are some relevant facts: In the three subdivisions comprising the proposed historic district, an area with nearly 450 houses, there have been a **total** of four tear downs/replacements since the rejection of the last HD effort in 2008, only three which would have been impeded by historic district status. In two instances single family homes were replaced with duplexes. This can only happen on the blocks west of Connecticut which are zoned R-2 and then only if the houses are situated on double lots, a tiny number. The third case arose because the purchasers of an old house found unfixable structural issues after they closed. The fourth case was a non-historic house built in 1958, bought out of foreclosure and replaced with an attractive frame house.

- 1) 3823 Morrison St - The twin of 3825 Morrison St., the house was one of the rare single family houses in the R-2 zone situated on a double lot that could support a two-family unit. It had been neglected for decades. When its reclusive 90+ year old owner died in 2013, a developer bought the house, declared it unsalvageable, and proposed to raze it and build a 5500 sq ft single-family home. After loud protests organized by a neighborhood activist, he flipped the house to another developer. Who built a duplex –

on a street whose next block is full of duplexes. Each half of the new duplex is about 4000 sq ft. The remaining twin to the original is 4700 sq. ft. The architecture of the duplex closely matches that of the original house and its twin – as you can plainly see. Identical twins? No. Fraternal twins? Clearly.



Fraternal Twins

2) 3831 Livingston St. – In 2015 a developer bought an undistinguished bungalow (for \$300,000 above list price – see Beggar Thy Smaller House neighbor) and replaced it with a duplex – the third in a row of duplexes. The original house and the new duplex (left) are pictured below. (Note the same neighborhood activist claimed that the new duplex “towered” over its neighbor.)



Before



After

3) 3734 Oliver St. – Long-time residents of the neighborhood eager to stay in the neighborhood with their growing family bought this house in 2018 without an inspection. They then found significant structural issues and determined that it was uneconomic to renovate. A stucco house in the same scale as its neighbors is nearing completion. The old and the still unfinished new are below.



Before



After

4) 3713 Livingston St – A neglected 1958 brick “Dutch Colonial Revival” was replaced with a larger frame house in 2020. The original house was a “non-contributing structure” in the 2007 HD application. HD status would not have prevented its replacement – and to these untutored eyes, that’s a good thing. (Note the above-mentioned activist called the new house “monstrous”.)



Before



After

Less than one percent of the houses in the proposed Chevy Chase historic district have been replaced in the last 14 years. We don't think the neighborhood has suffered in any way.

But don't take our word for it – go look for yourself.

These cases show that our neighborhood can grow and change without the expensive and time-consuming hurdles that preservation review would impose on almost every home improvement, not just a small handful of replacements.

The advocates for an HD may be way off base about the threat that teardowns pose to the neighborhood, but they are absolutely correct on one point: only one of these replacements would have happened if the historic district application had succeeded in 2008. The HPRB is currently taking the position that there can be no tear downs of contributing structures in historic districts – for any reason. In three of these four cases historic district designation would have inflicted a steep penalty on the homeowners: in two of these cases the seller would have seen a significant reduction in the value of their home and in one case the buyer would have had to make uneconomic repairs – spending as much or more to get a less good, and less attractive home.

Historic status would have imposed a serious hardship on three families. At the same time, it would have increased homeownership costs for the rest of us because we would be faced with potentially burdensome and expensive HD review for even modest repairs, renovations, or additions. All to make the neighborhood ... no better off.

Addendum -

A few folks on Chevy Chase Chatter complained about the “popup” at 3832 McKinley. Again, judge for yourself – but keep in mind that it replaced a very pedestrian and very run-down house. The before picture here is from 2004 and the house had deteriorated substantially before it was redone last year.



Before

After

Further addendum:

3920 Military Road – This house, located just outside the proposed HD, was recently razed – deconstructed. The family that owned the house gave the following response to objectors on the CC Listserv:

“Please find out all the facts before rushing to judgement. I used to own this 1921 house... This block of Military Rd does not have Kanawha St running behind it because of underground streams. Water from these same streams caused extensive foundation damage to the house which ended up with no straight windows or door frames and slanting floors. We lived in it without renovating but no self respecting builder faced with a big renovation job could stand behind work on such a foundation. Yes it's sad but it's not an unfeeling developer that is taking the opportunity to build something massive and ugly but the eventual plan will as closely as possible resemble the old house (at least from the street view).

Materials are being recycled to salvage places and some parts of the house will be used in the new building. I hope this information. will calm troubled waters (sorry for the pun)!”

The HPRB’s current position is that, if the house were in a historic district, the homeowner would have had to find a way to repair it, regardless of the cost. And to no real benefit to the neighborhood.