



Annual Report

Of the Board of Directors

Fiscal Year 2009

Presented at the Annual Meeting

March 6, 2010

Historic Mount Pleasant aims to bring neighbors together to celebrate and protect features of the Mount Pleasant Historic District that give the neighborhood its special character. Our website (www.historicmountpleasant.org) provides basic information about historic district requirements and links to a variety of other resources on historic preservation. We regularly field inquiries from residents about individual properties and work with the Historic Preservation Office in the D.C. Office of Planning and other official entities to resolve issues affecting the historic district. We participate in the D.C. Historic Districts Coalition and sponsor social and educational activities in Mount Pleasant.

Advice and Assistance on Exterior Renovations

Our principal ongoing activities relate to exterior renovations in Mount Pleasant – advising and assisting neighbors on permit requirements, reviewing designs with architects, and providing input on cases going before the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB). Given the broad scope of authority delegated by the Board to the staff of the Historic Preservation Office (HPO), the cases actually going to the Board for decision are relatively few in number. HPO advises all applicants whose cases must go to the Board to share their plans with both HMP and the ANC, and the HPRB invariably asks for our views during the hearing. If we cannot attend the hearing, we provide comments in writing to the staff beforehand. In all cases going to the Board, we invite the applicant to discuss his or her plans with us and also invite the views of neighbors who have expressed particular concerns about the project.

During Fiscal Year 2009 (December 2008-November 2009), the HPRB approved the following projects in the Mount Pleasant Historic District:

- 1833 Park, one-story rear addition and porch (January);
- 1854 Park, one-story rear addition (April);
- 3136 19th, two-story rear addition (May);
- 1815 Newton, third floor and rear infill additions (July);
- 3160 16th (Mount Pleasant Branch Library), rear addition (September-October);
- 3430-3432 Brown, front porch and rear addition (October).

With the exception of the decision on the library (see below), HMP generally supported the approaches recommended by staff and the decisions of the Board. All staff reports are available on the HPO website (www.planning.dc.gov/hpo), filed by month and year under HPRB Agenda and Staff Reports.

The Brown Street case presented the unusual situation of a property owner seeking to demolish most of two adjoining row houses, leaving the facades, and then to construct an entirely new six-unit apartment building behind them. A similar project had been approved in concept by the Board for this site in December 2007, but the project had not gone forward. This time, a different architect presented fully developed plans up front that showed clearly the extent of demolition intended. Under the Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978, “demolition” is defined as “the razing or destruction, entirely or *in significant part*, of a building or structure and includes the removal or destruction of any façade of a building or structure” (italics added). Applications for demolition must be reviewed separately and are subject to a much higher standard of review than applications for “alteration.” Demolition may

be authorized only in cases of “unreasonable economic hardship” to the owner, or where it is necessary to allow the construction of a “project of special merit” and a permit for new construction is issued simultaneously and the owner demonstrates the ability to complete such a project. At the hearing on Brown Street, HPRB members urged the applicant to avoid, if at all possible, the need for a demolition determination. We understand that staff has come to an agreement with the owners and architect in this case on an approach that entails substantially less demolition and that (the project will proceed this year??). We commend the demolition standards to your attention, however, for other potential applications in the neighborhood. Of most importance, the March 2008 fire at The Deauville (3145 Mount Pleasant Street) destroyed all but the façade of one wing, and the demolition of that façade is subject to the 1978 law. City contractors recently moved the bracing behind the façade to reopen the sidewalk and adjacent parking spaces while negotiations continue regarding the future of the building.

One other case in the neighborhood repeatedly appeared on the HPRB agenda but did not go to a public hearing. This was the case of 2017 Rosemount, where original windows on both the front and rear of this classic Tudor house had been replaced with vinyl ones, and the original front door also replaced with one of a totally different style. After many months of negotiations with the contractor and owner, HPO agreed to approve the replacements at the rear as well as the new front door and windows in the front alcove, on the condition that the original diamond-paned windows on the front be reinstalled and wooden double-hung windows be installed in place of the vinyl windows on the front of the second floor. The case illustrates the desirability not only of getting the necessary permits but also of consulting with HPO on alternatives before work of this kind is undertaken. Short handouts on topics such as window and door replacements, roof additions, accessibility, energy conservation and electric meters are available on the HPO website under Design Guidelines. The website also has the entire text of the 1978 law and its implementing regulations, which contain a long section on window replacement.

The Library

The D.C. Public Library (DCPL) plan to construct a major addition to the Mount Pleasant Branch Library was the major focus of our attention during 2009. When exterior restoration work was undertaken several years before, the Friends of the Mount Pleasant Library had forwarded the plans for our review in a timely fashion. The plans indicated restoration of windows and masonry, which the building sorely needed, and the addition of security lights behind the building. We indicated a preference for security lights that would be more in keeping with the style of the building than the modern ones later installed. In contrast, when DCPL developed plans to radically change the exterior of the building, it made no effort to contact Historic Mount Pleasant. Nor did either the Friends of the Mount Pleasant Library or ANC 1D, notwithstanding the fact that both were represented on the DCPL panel that selected the architect for the project.

It was not until October 2008 when a representative of the Mount Pleasant Condominium contacted us and we attended a meeting at the library that we learned the nature and extent of the preparations underway. We have provided updates to our members over the past year, so this will simply highlight major steps to provide a brief public record of what occurred from our point of view.

At the meeting in October 2008, Chief Librarian Ginnie Cooper explained her objectives for the site, and the architectural team presented their latest conceptual design which included a glass-fronted addition occupying the entire west yard on Lamont Street and a switchback ramp to the main entrance. Objections to the design were expressed by representatives of ANC1D and the Mount Pleasant Condo Association, among others. At the conclusion of the meeting, HMP representatives approached Ms. Cooper and asked to meet with the architects at their convenience, citing design review requirements of the historic district. No time frame was set. We assumed we would have the opportunity to express our opinion as the case went through the ordinary review process with HPO and HPRB, and HPO informed us it did not expect to receive the plans until after the first of the year. In mid-January 2009, however, we learned that the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) would be hearing the case in February, that HPO did not plan to take the case to HPRB (assuming that CFA would handle the matter appropriately), and that public testimony at CFA was at the discretion of the Commission.

We asked to meet with the DCPL design team before their CFA filing date (February 5), and we met with them on January 29. They informed us at that time that the “design phase” of the contract had been completed months before and that they could not take any of our fundamental design concerns into account. As a result, we immediately contacted other neighborhood groups dissatisfied with the process by which plans for the renovation had been developed and with the design itself. On February 5, we sent a letter to Chief Librarian Cooper noting that strong opposition had emerged to the proposed addition for aesthetic, historic and functional reasons and asking for further public consultation to inform the design process. The letter was also signed by representatives of the Mount Pleasant Neighborhood Alliance, Mount Pleasant Main Street and Hear Mount Pleasant. One of the signers was also an ANC Commissioner. Copies went to the Mayor’s Office as well as to Councilmember Jim Graham.

On February 12, we submitted a memorandum to the CFA describing the historic and architectural importance of the library building and outlining specific objections to the proposed design, which concerned primarily the placement of the addition and ramp. We argued that any addition should be to the rear and that the ramp should stay in its present location, where it was convenient to use and did not detract from the symmetry of the building. At its hearing on February 19, the CFA declined to approve the design in concept and asked that further design alternatives be submitted. On February 20, Councilmember Graham asked Mayor Fenty in writing to “pause the process pertaining to the current library renovation plans and engage the community in real, community discussion and input into the library’s design process.”

There followed a long series of meetings – at ANCs, the Board of Library Trustees, large and small ones at the library – that resulted in a significant change in the design of both the addition and the ramp. The addition was now proposed to be behind the original building and to extend out to the west property line, with the ramp running generally along that property line to a new secondary entrance into an atrium between the original building and the new wing. As the major changes followed the recommendations that we made, HMP supported the new design concept when presented to the CFA in June. However, the CFA was not satisfied and again asked for additional alternatives, particularly on the ramp. The same thing happened in July, when the CFA chairman called the rear wall of the addition “bland, boring and mechanical” and another member said the building was “still wrong,” with “too much program,” and that “to go

forward would be regrettable.” Nevertheless, at the internal meeting prior to the next CFA hearing on September 17, the Commission voted 6-1 to approve the very same design concept it had rejected in July without public discussion.

In the meantime, motivated by the public controversy, HPO had decided to put the case before the HPRB. The hearing took place on September 24. The staff report noted that CFA review “had not yet reached a conclusion on the concept except for general support for the addition’s rear location – until this month, when it was overwhelmingly approved.” The report went on to observe that there was “room for refinement and further development,” particularly as related to the side yard and ramp, and recommended HPRB approval in concept with delegation of further review to the staff in coordination with CFA. HPRB accepted the staff recommendation – although not until the following month, to allow time for ANC’s 1D and 1C (Adams Morgan) to supplement the record. Both ANCs urged major changes to the design. In her testimony, HMP President Fay Armstrong tried to walk a fine line of not opposing the basic design concept while suggesting that significant improvements would be welcome. At the October hearing, there was also an impassioned plea from a disabilities rights advocate that the design not be approved because of the long ramp.

In conclusion, while HMP supported the revised basic design concept for the library, we were very disappointed with the way the case was handled by both the CFA and HPRB. In both venues, we invited improvements to the final design, but none were forthcoming. Indeed, we can point to no refinements to the design that originated with either the CFA or HPO/HPRB. However, as we pointed out in a recent letter to Councilmember Harry Thomas, Chairman of the Committee on Libraries, Parks and Recreation, the fundamental problems that continue to be raised regarding the “design” – namely, the size of the addition and the length of the ramp – really call into question the “program” developed by DCPL for this site. Established “design review” processes, whether at the CFA, HPRB or HMP, must work with property owners’ decisions on how to use their buildings and lot areas. None could insist with DCPL, as one of the ANC1D resolutions brokered by Councilmember Graham asked, that our beautiful Carnegie building simply be restored and brought up to code and that any addition be limited to what might be needed on the ground level for equipment.

As of this date, the result appears to be that the last and grandest of the Carnegie branch library buildings in the District will be torn apart on the inside, its attractive sun room removed and a hulking addition added to the west extending to the property line. The new entrance into the atrium at the rear of the original building will likely become the new main entrance to the library. We cannot help but ask why such dramatic changes are being imposed on such a unique historic property in the absence of a master plan for citywide library facilities. This is the question we put to Councilmember Thomas on January 11.

Neighborhood Grants

In January 2009, HMP, the Mount Pleasant Business Association and Mount Pleasant Main Street applied together for a Neighborhood Investment Fund grant to fund technical assistance for commercial property improvements on Mount Pleasant Street. While we were hopeful of receiving that grant, we did not, but we have applied again this year with the Business

Association for a much smaller amount (\$56,000?). One of the issues last year was the need for and our proposal to provide one-on-one technical assistance, which we consider fundamentally more effective than the classroom-style training specified in the terms of reference for the grant, and such assistance is explicitly allowed by the terms of this year's competition. We also have a standing offer to the Business Association to assist its members upgrade signage in the context of broader investment programs, with priority to be given to replacement of backlit plastic signs.

In October, Main Street was notified that it had been selected by the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) for a \$240,000 transportation enhancement grant for use in improving the streetscape and lighting along Mount Pleasant Street. DDOT will manage the funds directly, but the specific uses of the funds appear to be subject to negotiation with DDOT as many of the proposed uses depend on separate action by DDOT for which funding may not be immediately available. Design issues are involved here – for Lamont Park among other sites – and HMP will continue to follow this process and work with Main Street and DDOT to refine the scope of the grant as opportunities arise. HMP also participated this past year in the Small Area Planning Exercise for the commercial corridor organized by the D.C. Office of Planning. They are currently preparing the draft plan, and we will continue to follow this process. (Laurie: where does this discussion belong? A separate section – or a better insert right here?? Or a footnote?)

City Arts application to DCCA. (Rachel has now replied to neither my voicemail nor an e-mail regarding next steps.)

Last year we were pleased to announce that residents of Mount Pleasant, within the income limitations established, were now eligible for Historic Homeowners Grants through HPO. Due to cuts in the budget last year, however, all FY 2010 funds were exhausted in May 2009, and new applications will not be received until the summer of 2010 when the FY 2011 budget is known.

Historic Mount Pleasant made several grants this past year to neighborhood organizations: \$250 to the Adams Mill Elm Fund towards periodic treatment against Dutch Elm disease of the irreplaceable trees along Adams Mill Road; \$500 to the Mount Pleasant Solar Coop for publicity and other costs associated with the Solar House Tours and EcoLiving Fair in September 2009; and a \$1000 to the Rosemount Center toward the cost of replacing the rustic wooden fence at the entrance with an iron one of a design appropriate to the beautifully-restored building. HMP also made a \$200 contribution to the D.C. Historic Districts Coalition (HDC) to help it establish the counterpart fund required by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to assist the Coalition with a strategic planning exercise during the coming year. HMP and similar organizations throughout the District rely on HDC for information and guidance on preservation issues and have agreed to develop a plan to put the Coalition on a stronger organizational basis.

Promoting Broader Membership and Involvement

The annual holiday party the first Friday in December is also our main membership drive. We mail invitations to the entire neighborhood, and each year attract a few new members. At the end of fiscal year 2009, HMP had xxx members, including xx lifetime members. Xx new members joined at the party in December 2009 and renewals are still coming in. We will send

reminder notices to old members who have not renewed by March 15(??) We express our sincere appreciation to Bonnie Cain and Frank Method for hosting the party in December.

We urge you to help us reach out to neighbors, particularly new ones, to tell them about HMP and elicit their support and participation. We would like to develop new activities this coming year but need volunteers to plan and implement them. Judging from the turnout at the Solar Fair and our January 2010 program on energy efficiency and old houses at Stoddard, there is strong interest in “green” building techniques and, more generally, the use of new technologies to keep our wonderful old housing stock going. We would like to bring more of this practical information to the neighborhood but need to hear from you what would be most useful. Please contact any member of the Board of Directors or our website (www.historicmountpleasant.org) with suggestions. And please volunteer your time.