

## **HISTORIC MOUNT PLEASANT, INC.**

Annual Report

March 1, 2008

As noted in our mission statement, the primary purpose of Historic Mount Pleasant is to bring neighbors together to celebrate and protect features of the built environment that give the neighborhood its special character. Toward that end, during 2007 we continued to work with neighbors and the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) to review permit applications before the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB). We participated in the D.C. Historic Districts Coalition (HDC) and sponsored activities in the neighborhood.

### Advice and Assistance on Exterior Renovations

Our principal ongoing activities relate to exterior renovations in Mount Pleasant – advising neighbors about permit requirements, reviewing designs with architects, and providing input to HPO and HPRB decisionmaking in particular cases. As most permit decisions are made at the HPO staff level—and thus never formally come before the HPRB itself—it is essential that we develop and maintain close working relationships with the staff person(s) assigned to handle applications from our neighborhood. In August 2007, that assignment changed from Tim Dennee to Jonathan Mellon; however, Tim is continuing to handle cases before the HPRB that he was initially involved in as the staff member. Inquiries about new projects may be addressed to [jonathan.mellon@dc.gov](mailto:jonathan.mellon@dc.gov). We are working with both of them, as well as with the new Director of HPO and State Historic Preservation Officer, David Maloney. David was appointed to this position in October and has more than twenty-five years of experience working on preservation issues in the District.

The HPRB itself is also in a period of transition, with the terms of office of all eleven members having expired in 2007. Based on a statutory change in 2006, the Board will henceforth have only nine members, with staggered terms. By law, the HPRB must include individuals professionally qualified in the fields of archaeology, architecture and history, and it should also represent to the greatest extent possible the demographic characteristics of the District. As this is written, the last six appointments to the Board are awaiting confirmation by the Council. At the hearing on January 29, representatives of the DC Preservation League (DCPL), HDC, Committee on 100 of the Federal City, and the Dupont Circle Conservancy expressed reservations about the nominating process and the overall composition of the new Board. DCPL is arranging for representatives of historic preservation organizations, including HMP, to meet with nominees previously unknown to the preservation community. We will thereafter provide views to the Council. We remain particularly concerned about the proposed reduction in the number and cumulative professional experience of architects on the Board. The eleven-person Board had three architects, all of whom were very experienced with preservation.

Over the last twelve months, the HPRB—that is, the Board itself—approved the following projects in the Mount Pleasant Historic District:

- 1733 Kenyon, rooftop addition;
- 3360 16<sup>th</sup> Street, driveway extension;
- 3120 19<sup>th</sup> Street, two-story rear addition;
- 1620 Newton, revised concept/subdivision including new construction of a rowhouse;
- 3228 Walbridge, excavation in front of the porch to install a lift to basement (see paragraph below);
- 1811 Kenyon, second story rear addition and new garage;
- 1823 Newton, third-story addition subject to conditions;
- 3430-32 Brown, front alterations and rear addition;
- 3310 19<sup>th</sup> Street, new garage;
- 3142 17<sup>th</sup> Street, rear addition;
- 1747 Kilbourne, second story rear addition;
- 3108/10/12 18<sup>th</sup> Street, rear patios and retaining wall; and
- 1757 Harvard, rear addition.

Reflecting the increased authority vested in HPO staff, a majority of these projects went forward without substantive comments from HMP. In January, the Design Review Chair began meeting with HPO staff early each month to review applications received. At its meeting on January 31, the HPRB deferred decision on applications to construct new front basement entrances at 1709 and 1714 Irving, pending further documentation of original front basement entrances in Mount Pleasant and development of guidelines for considering such requests in the future. We will be working with HPO staff to develop this information for the Board.

The January session also revealed multiple inconsistencies between permits issued and the work done at 1663 Newton, including the unauthorized demolition of the garage, replacement of the original slate mansard roof with imitation slate, and installation of vinyl-clad windows. The case will go back to the Board after HPO staff verifies the problems and develops further recommendations. This illustrates the **need for continued vigilance** over projects in the neighborhood and reporting suspected violations to HPO. HPO has only two enforcement officers (another is being hired) and cannot possibly identify all illegal work in the District by itself. Construction permits are required to be posted in a visible location on site (generally front windows) and describe the work authorized. If members observe major construction underway that exceeds the scope of work described, or without such permits being posted, it is appropriate to contact either HPO, in the case of exterior work, or DCRA, in the case of interior work. The HMP Design Review Committee or HMP Board checks out cases brought to our attention, but cannot always do so in a timely fashion and thus appreciate others making direct contact with the appropriate city agency when they can. E-mails may be sent to HPO enforcement staff – [toni.cherry@dc.gov](mailto:toni.cherry@dc.gov) and [keith.lambert@dc.gov](mailto:keith.lambert@dc.gov). Another alternative is calling “311” which permits anonymous reports.

The HPRB’s consideration of the permit for **3228 Walbridge** was unfortunately the subject of some inflammatory press attention. HMP was never directly involved in

the consideration of the diverse issues raised in the case, which was recently settled on terms that remain confidential. However, what we observed in the hearings on the case was an HPRB and an HPO interested in helping the owner identify practical ways of adapting the house to the continued use of his disabled parents and a resistance on the part of the son and his architect to any discussion of design alternatives. While the public clamor over the case focused on HPRB denial of the proposed ramp for aesthetic reasons, a more fundamental problem was that the proposed ramp was too steep to meet building code requirements. The final result – a wheelchair accessible chair lift starting under the porch – meets the parents’ stated needs without removing half the porch, at much less excavation cost than the original proposal. Contrary to the inflamed commentary this case generated, preservationists and housing officials have been working together for years to design appropriate solutions for handicapped access to buildings in historic districts.

#### Attention to Zoning Issues

On October 17, 2007, the D.C. Court of Appeals heard oral argument in our lawsuit aimed at requiring the Board of Zoning Adjustment to consider a challenge to its issuance of a certificate of occupancy for **1636 Irving Street**. The case remains with the court for decision. During the fall of 2004, the house – a single family dwelling previously converted into a three-unit apartment building – was expanded to approximately twice its size and converted into a seven-unit condominium. Under DC zoning laws, the maximum number of units allowed on a lot this size is three. As an apartment building, it was limited to 40% of lot occupancy, but it now covers 60%. DCRA admitted error in the issuance of the permit but BZA dismissed the challenge to issuance of the certificate on procedural grounds. We have joined with neighbors on Irving Street to require a substantive hearing on the merits and believe our counsel has given the Court sufficient grounds to rule in our favor.

The project on Irving Street illustrates the importance for all historic districts of having a zoning regime that complements preservation objectives. The D.C. Office of Planning recently initiated a **review of the District’s fifty-year-old zoning code**. Among the recommendations already submitted for consideration by the D.C. Federation of Citizens Associations and endorsed by the Committee on 100 are better protections for row-house neighborhoods that are under great pressure for development. Mount Pleasant is certainly one such neighborhood, and we will work with others within the HDC to develop and press for needed changes in the zoning code. The revision process is expected to take at least two years.

#### Guidance on Window Replacements

Another project initiated through HDC is development of recommendations for HPO to improve **procedures and guidelines for window replacements**. Due largely to a controversy in Takoma Park that resulted in a lawsuit against the District over a permit issued for window replacements, HPO sought input from the HDC on the acceptability of Anderson Renewal Fibrex windows for primary elevations on contributing buildings in

historic districts. Takoma Park Historical Society was vehemently opposed, as their settlement with the District had required HPO to inform the distributor that Fibrex windows could not be considered as “wood” windows. Further discussion of the broader problems involved with window replacements identified gaps in current procedures for issuance of permits. HPO asked for formal recommendations from the HDC on this issue, and we will be part of the working group.

### Activities Within the Neighborhood

Over the last year HMP sponsored periodic potlucks at members’ homes, a Heritage Trail walk narrated by Mara Cherkasky, the yard sale in June, and the holiday party at the home of Linda and Rob Low in December. All these events were well-attended, and we thank all those who made their homes available. We have also reconfigured our website and incorporated links to many other sources of information on historic preservation, which we hope will be of assistance to anyone who consults the site. Last year we announced our intention to develop a small signage project with Mount Pleasant Street businesses participating in the façade renovation program sponsored by the Latino Economic Development Corporation (LEDC). This proved more difficult than we anticipated and we did not proceed. More recently we have been approached by the Mount Pleasant Business Association to participate in a community effort to improve Lamont Park. We have confirmed our interest in such a project and await further developments. This will require renewed inquiries of the Department of Parks and Recreation, which owns the park and has previously indicated its willingness to include the park in its budget for required maintenance and other work.

Mount Pleasant residents should also be aware that this year, for the first time, qualified low- and moderate-income homeowners in our historic district may apply to HPO for assistance under the **Historic Homeowner Grant Program** to pay for certified rehabilitation work. The program began last year with a pilot phase limited to Anacostia and is now open to residents of 12 historic districts. Grants may cover repair and preservation of exterior features, such as exterior walls and siding, windows, roofs, cornices, porches, steps, fences, and masonry, or structural repairs like rebuilding a sagging floor or repairing a failed foundation. The applications are available on the HPO website at <http://planning.dc.gov/hpo> (select Financial Incentives and Resources) or by contacting Program coordinator Brendan Meyer at (202) 442-8800 or [Brendan.Meyer@dc.gov](mailto:Brendan.Meyer@dc.gov). Deadline for applications this year is April 1. Please help us get the word out to neighbors who may be eligible for this program.

### Promoting Broader Membership and Involvement

The HMP Board provided an interim report to then-current members through an electronic bulletin in September. In the past, HMP has published (intermittently) paper newsletters, in some cases distributing them to the entire neighborhood (both members and non-members). However, such efforts are time-consuming and expensive. E-mail bulletins are by far the most cost-effective way of keeping members informed about HMP activities. Unfortunately, a downside is that our activities are less visible to non-

members who might pick up a printed newsletter. We ask members to help us get the word out about the benefits and responsibilities of living in a historic district and also to help us develop and implement new programs of interest to the neighborhood. We cannot achieve our broader objectives without the active participation and support of members. Please also use the website and other means of communication to give us your ideas of what we should be doing in the neighborhood and the community at large. One idea already tried is revamping the format of potluck dinners to focus on attracting new members in a specific street or block. We need volunteers to expand our activities and make HMP more visible within the neighborhood.