

**COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW  
STAFF REPORT  
May 27, 2014 Meeting**

9. **CAR No. 14-77** (2400 E. Franklin LLC) **2400 E. Franklin Street  
St. John's Church Old and Historic District**

**Project Description:** **Construct five new single-family dwellings**

**Staff Contact:** **C. Easterling**

The applicant requests approval to construct five new single-family dwellings at a vacant lot located in the St. John's Church Old and Historic District. The lot has a very steep grade, and is located adjacent to a set of concrete stairs that run from North 24<sup>th</sup> Street to East Franklin Street. The applicant proposes to construct five buildings on the site: three attached buildings facing Franklin Street and two attached buildings at the rear of the lot sited so as not to fully face any street or walkway. The residences will each have ground-level garage access on the façade. The proposed contemporary fenestration does not appear to include any front doors aside from the garage doors. After consulting with Commission staff about the incompatibility of some of the design elements, the applicant decided to pursue a very preliminary **conceptual review** of the project with the Commission of Architectural Review. The applicant has chosen not to develop the design any further until the Commission provides comments related to the siting and the ground-level garage entry.

Conceptual review is covered under Sec. 114-930.6(d) of the City Code: *The commission shall review and discuss the proposal with the applicant and make any necessary recommendations. Such Conceptual Review shall be advisory only.* Commission staff reviewed the project through the lens of the Standards for New Construction on pages 44 and 45 of the *Richmond Old and Historic District Handbook and Design Review Guidelines* and the resulting comments follow.

**Staff Findings based on Commission of Architectural Review Guidelines**

**STANDARDS FOR NEW CONSTRUCTION**

*New construction should be compatible with the historic features that characterize its setting and context. To protect the significance of the historic context, the new work should reference the historic materials, features, size, scale, proportions, and massing of its setting. However, new construction should be clearly discernible from the old to protect the authenticity of the historic district.*

## **SITING**

1. *Additions should be subordinate in size to the main structure and as inconspicuous as possible. Locating them at the rear or least visible side of the structure is preferred.*

This standard is not applicable.

2. *New infill construction should respect the prevailing front and side yard setback patterns of the surrounding block. The minimal setbacks evident in most districts reinforce the traditional street wall.*

The applicant has indicated to staff that the buildings facing Franklin Street will be set back from the sidewalk, but he has not specified the distance. The existing buildings along this block have no front yard setback, making any new infill with a setback inconsistent with the historic patterns of development along the block. Any new development should address the sidewalk in a manner comparable to buildings in the immediate area.

3. *New structures should face the most prominent street bordering the site.*

Three of the proposed five buildings face the most prominent street bordering the site. The other two buildings are sited in a manner that is incompatible with the historic patterns of development in the Church Hill area. It is the assessment of staff that the siting of these two buildings is entirely inappropriate.

## **FORM**

1. *New construction should use a building form compatible with that found elsewhere in the immediate area. Building form refers to the specific combination of massing, size, symmetry, proportions, projections, and roof shapes that lend identity to a structure. Building form is greatly influenced by the architectural style of a given structure.*

The form of the building is atypical of historic construction in the district. The block-like form and flat roof of the proposed building is compatible with adaptively-reused buildings in the area, but the fenestration and the individual garage entry doors are not compatible with the district. Loading doors are present on larger-scale industrial buildings in the immediate area, but the closely spaced garage doors for this smaller-scale development does not appear to relate to the historic context. The applicant has not supplied a site plan or floor plans for the project, so staff cannot determine if any of the building elements will project from the main plane of the façade. The applicant has not supplied renderings for the two buildings proposed for the rear of the lot, so staff cannot assess the appropriateness of the form of these dwellings.

## **SCALE**

1. *New construction should maintain the existing human scale of historic residential and commercial neighborhoods. The inappropriate use of monumentally-scaled buildings that overwhelm pedestrians at the street level is discouraged.*

The applicant has not supplied information about the height of the building. However, a typical three-story building would not be out of place at this location if the lot is graded to be consistent with the grade of adjacent lots. The applicant would need to supply an elevation drawing depicting the proposed development within the context of adjacent buildings before staff can fully assess the appropriateness of the building scale.

2. *New additions and infill structures should incorporate human-scale elements such as storefronts and porches into their design.*

Buildings along the block are generally adaptively-reused industrial buildings that do not have front porches. However, these buildings have entry doors and storefronts that help to enliven the street and enhance the pedestrian experience. The three, closely-spaced garage doors facing Franklin Street do not enhance the pedestrian experience. The buildings appear to lack any pedestrian entryway or windows at the ground level. This is incompatible with the character of the district.

## **HEIGHT, WIDTH, PROPORTION, & MASSING**

1. *New construction should respect the typical height of surrounding houses and commercial structures.*

The applicant has not supplied information about the height of the building. However, a typical three-story building would not be out of place at this location if the lot is graded to be consistent with the grade of adjacent lots. The applicant would need to supply an elevation drawing depicting the proposed development within the context of adjacent buildings before staff can fully assess the appropriateness of the building scale.

2. *New construction should respect the vertical orientation typical of commercial and residential properties in historic districts. New designs that call for wide massing of more than 30 feet should be broken up by bays.*

The design respects the typical vertical orientation buildings in the immediate area.

3. *Typical massing patterns throughout city historic districts are simple and block-like; therefore, new structures should avoid the use of staggered setbacks, towers, or elaborate balconies.*

The applicant has not supplied a site plan or floor plans for the project, so staff cannot determine if any of the building elements will project from the main plane of the façade. The applicant has not supplied renderings for the two buildings proposed for the rear of the lot, so staff cannot assess the appropriateness of the form of these dwellings.

***MATERIALS, COLORS, & DETAILS***

- 1. New construction should not cover or destroy original architectural elements.*

This standard is not applicable.

- 2. Missing building elements should be replaced with new elements compatible in size, scale, and material to the original elements without creating a false historical appearance.*

This standard is not applicable.

- 3. Materials used in new construction should be compatible with original materials used throughout the surrounding neighborhood.*

The application calls for the use of brick, steel, and glass in the construction, though the application does not specify the location of these materials. Generally, these materials would be appropriate for use in this area.

- 4. Paint colors for new additions should complement those of the primary structure. Paint colors used should be similar to the historically appropriate colors found in the immediate neighborhood and throughout the larger district.*

The applicant has not yet indicated color selections.

- 5. Vinyl, asphalt, and aluminum siding are not permitted for use in City Old and Historic Districts. Other synthetic siding materials with a smooth, untextured finish may be allowed in limited cases, but approval by the Commission is always required.*

The design does not call for the use of these materials.

- 6. Vinyl windows are strongly discouraged and rarely permitted.*

The application does not specify the materials for the windows.

\_\_\_\_\_

Based on the limited information provided by the applicant, the design appears to be incompatible with the historic buildings located in the immediate area. Staff encourages the applicant to revise the design so that the siting of buildings on

the parcel is more appropriate, and so that the ground level of the building facades incorporates human-scale elements. Future submissions to the Commission should include information about grading the lot and any retaining structures that will be necessary for development.