

**COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
STAFF REPORT
October 28, 2014 Meeting**

18. **CAR No. 14-122** (Urban Core Development) **722-724 N. 23rd Street
Union Hill Old and Historic District**

Project Description: **Construct new mixed-use development**

Staff Contact: **J. Hill**

The applicant requests conceptual review of proposed construction of a new mixed-use development on a triangular vacant lot located in the Union Hill Old and Historic District. The majority of historic buildings in Union Hill were constructed in the second half of the nineteenth century, and include a wide variety of architectural forms and styles.

The project comprises one three-story building with ground-floor commercial use with two flats on each of the two stories above and a second two-story building with two attached townhouses. Though the documentation provided is more gestural in nature than many conceptual review applications, the materials effectively convey the intended program, the modeling of the building massing and volume within the context of the site, and the articulation of the exterior and how the proposed construction will address the street.

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 structure built to house commercial activity is built to the property line, the traditional pattern for corner commercial properties in the City's historic neighborhoods and in this Old and Historic District in particular. The main body of the townhouse units are set back from the property line with the porches built to the public right-of-way. The porch stairs are inset so as not to encroach on the sidewalk. Many houses in the district have minimal front yard setbacks and the porches of the existing adjacent houses facing North 23rd Street appear to be built to the sidewalk's edge.

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

The proposed development appears successfully to address North 23rd Street. The project documentation did not include views of the Jessamine Street elevations, which will need to include information about the rear of the townhouses and their back yards address the street.

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 design of the new buildings reference the traditional configuration of corner commercial development, storefronts, townhouses, porches, and roof forms, adapted to the triangular configuration of the site. Some additional refinement of detail is expected in subsequent submission documentation to convey a better understanding of such elements as the fenestration, articulation (if desired) between the commercial and residential stories and the design/proportions of the cornice on the corner unit.

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 proposed buildings maintain the existing human scale of the neighborhood.

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

The proposed designs include storefronts, porches, and human-scale entrances.

HEIGHT, WIDTH, PROPORTION, & MASSING

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

The proposed development appears to exceed the height of the existing adjacent buildings by proposing two-story buildings next to the existing historic residences and then stepping up to three stories. The three-story height seems to work not only because of the large institutional building across 23rd Street but also because of the siting of the taller building on the point of a triangular island where the two streets converge. Future submissions to the Commission of Architectural Review should note building dimensions and include a drawing depicting the height of the proposed buildings within the context of the cornice height and roof height of the adjacent structures.

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 of two-story residences in the district, although more detail is needed for the elevations.

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 proposed a solid, block-like design that is compatible with the massing of residential properties in the neighborhood. The insets for entrances, porches and balconies are rational and reflect the traditional forms for the buildings' uses.

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 general discussion of materials includes “parged appearance masonry” and horizontal siding. Subsequent submissions will need to specify if the Commission is being asked to consider stucco or some synthetic product with the appearance of stucco. The *Guidelines* would allow wood siding or perhaps fiber-cement siding, which should have a smooth finish (as opposed to a faux grain), and the applicant should specify the reveal. The applicant will also need to specify the materials for the trim and the storefront and porch components of the buildings.

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 made color selections for this level of review.

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 application does not call for any of these products.

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

Because the design calls for divided-lite windows, vinyl windows would not be an effective or desirable choice for this application.