

BAR #2020-00197

City Council
October 17, 2020

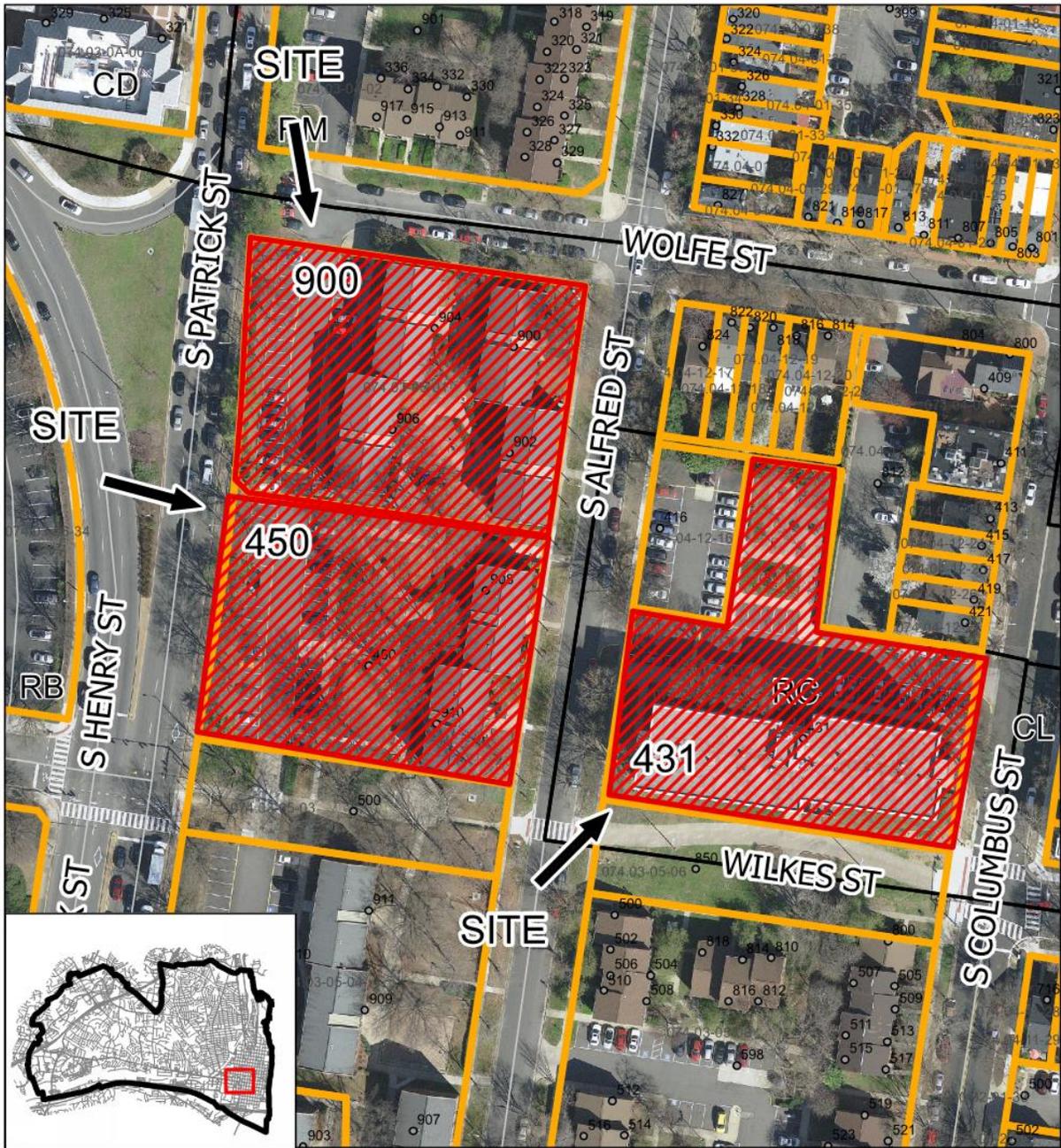
ISSUE: Appeal of a decision of the Board of Architectural Review approving a Permit to Demolish (complete) in the Old & Historic Alexandria District

APPLICANT: Heritage at Old Town PropCo LLC

APPELLANT: Various Appellants

LOCATION: 900 Wolfe Street, 450 South Patrick Street, 431 South Columbus Street

ZONE: RB/RC: Townhouse Zone/High Density Apartment Zone



BAR #2020-00197
450 South Patrick Street, 900 Wolfe Street &
431 South Columbus Street



I. ISSUE

The September 2, 2020 decision of the Board of Architectural Review to approve a Permit to Demolish (complete) at 900 Wolfe Street, 450 South Patrick Street, and 431 South Columbus Street has been appealed by Christopher C. and Kay M. Morell, residing at 421 South Columbus Street, and other petitioners. The four buildings to be demolished include a six-story apartment building and three garden style apartment buildings constructed in the 1970s. The appeal states: “The Board failed to address whether or not the retention of the buildings would help preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in the city, one of the criteria which must be met in order to permit a demolition. The buildings to be demolished may have historic significance as representative of the urban renewal era of affordable housing. They merit more historic research to determine their historic value to the community at large. The Board also failed to take into consideration the feasibility that retention of the buildings would make the city a more attractive and desirable place to live, a criteria which must also be met in order to gain a permit to demolish.” The Board discussion of the Permit to Demolish criteria can be found in the attached Board staff report.

II. HISTORY

The Board first reviewed the request for demolition at a hearing held on July 15, 2020. Speakers expressed concern regarding noticing as well as the possible historic nature of the buildings. At the hearing, staff verified that proper noticing procedures were followed, and the Board requested that the applicant defer and provide direct notice to every resident of the subject buildings. One member of the Board also questioned the extent of the historic evaluation of the 1970s buildings provided by the applicant. The Board voted to defer the item and subsequently reviewed the application on September 2, 2020 and approved the request for a Permit to Demolish by a vote of 5-1. An Amharic translator was available at this hearing to facilitate additional feedback from residents.

This 1970s development dramatically altered this part of SW Old Town and reshaped the traditional African American community known as The Bottoms, or The Dip, which was established between 1790 and 1810. According to A Remarkable and Courageous Journey: A Guide to Alexandria’s African American History, page 16: “Begun in the 18th century, the Bottoms was the first black neighborhood in Alexandria. The Bottoms rests at a lower elevation than surrounding streets, hence its name. The Lawrason family entered into long-term ground rent agreements with several free blacks on the 300 block of South Alfred Street, which became the nucleus of the Bottoms. The Colored Baptist Society, eventually the Alfred Street Baptist Church and the Odd Fellows Joint Stock Company, the oldest known African American association, were located in the Bottoms. Many of these structures and a number of townhouses are still visible on the 300 block of South Alfred Street.”¹ The Heritage development destroyed much of this community, which included residences, shops, businesses, and a train yard.

The Heritage at Old Town was constructed in **1976-1977** as part of The Dip Urban Renewal project. The Dip Limited Partnership secured funding from the federal government under a program to support the construction of affordable housing. The project was built in phases and

¹ Courageous Journey: A Guide to Alexandria’s African American History, Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association, 2001; revised and reprinted by Visit Alexandria, 2015, pg. 16.

provided 407 dwellings in an eleven-block area bounded by Duke, South Columbus, Gibbon, and South Fayette streets.² City of Alexandria Permit #9548, issued on July 29, 1975, authorized construction of the area encompassing the blocks bounded by Wolfe, South Alfred, and South Patrick streets, as well as the block bounded by Wolfe, South Alfred, and Wilkes streets. See Figure 1. The Washington, DC architectural firm of McDonald and Williams, specifically Herbert G. McDonald and Harry P. Williams, designed the project.



Figure 1: Heritage development: blocks in green, buildings to be demolished in yellow, historic district boundary in red

Per the building permit, the six-story apartment building on the north side of Wilkes Street between South Columbus and South Alfred Streets provided 100 dwelling units and was constructed with a concrete structural frame, masonry walls, and a built-up and gravel flat roof. (Figure 2) The two-story garden apartments on the south side of Wolfe Street between South Patrick and South Alfred Streets provided 48 dwelling units in 24 apartments and were constructed with masonry exterior walls and a gable asphalt shingle roof. (Figure 3) A moratorium on federally-subsidized housing and escalating costs delayed the beginning of construction, but the first stage of The Dip Urban Renewal project moved forward in September of 1975. This stage consisted of the construction of the six-story apartment building for 100 families and included 72 garden apartments and 7 townhouses.³

² John B. Willmann, "Subsidized Rental Housing: That's NHP's Arena in Area," *Washington Post*, 03 September 1977, pg. C1.

³ "Low-Income Housing to Blend with Historic," *Washington Post*, 13 September 1975, pg. D36.



Figure 2: Six-story building as built



Figure 3: Garden apartments as built

III. DISCUSSION

The Board's primary charge in the Zoning Ordinance is to identify and protect historic and cultural resources throughout the city. The Board's role has always been to strike a balance between preservation of the identified historic fabric and urban character while managing appropriate growth and change in a vibrant living city.

Permit to Demolish

Board consideration of a Permit to Demolish under the Zoning Ordinance is independent of any proposed development and must be considered on its own merits. While it is often combined in staff reports or during Board discussion for convenience, it is a separate action by the Board. In larger development projects, the Board often votes independently on the Permit to Demolish during the optional concept review process so that the applicant has a level of certainty going forward, saving both time and money if a Permit to Demolish is denied.

In considering a Permit to Demolish, the Board, and City Council on appeal, shall consider the following criteria set forth in Zoning Ordinance § 10-105(B) and set out in **bold** below. It should be noted that the City Council's consideration of the Zoning Ordinance criteria on appeal is independent of the Board's decision. While City Council may review and consider the Board's previous action, City Council will separately make its own decision based on an evaluation of the previously submitted material and any new material presented at the hearing.

To make a decision related to a Permit to Demolish, the City Council "consider[s] any or all of the following criteria [(below)] in determining whether or not to grant a permit to move, remove, capulate or demolish in whole or in part a building or structure within the Old and Historic Alexandria District." Following is staff's analysis of each the Zoning Ordinance criteria.

1. Is the building or structure of such architectural or historical interest that its moving, removing, capsulating or razing would be to the detriment of the public interest?

These buildings are of a typical architectural style of many non-descript multi-family buildings constructed throughout the country during the late 20th century and so their preservation would not serve a public interest. Additionally, very few buildings in the City would fulfill this criterion as buildings of historical interest, as this is a high standard. For example, demolishing City Hall, Christ Church, Gadsby's Tavern, or an entire neighborhood would be detrimental to the public interest. For the foregoing reasons, these four buildings do not rise to the level of architectural or historical importance and the proposed demolition would not be to the detriment of the public interest.

2. Is the building or structure of such interest that it could be made into a historic shrine?

This criterion requires that the property be a place of pilgrimage associated with a person of extraordinary significance, such as George Washington's Mount Vernon or Thomas Jefferson's Monticello or an historic event such as General Braddock's conference at Carlyle House, which planted the seeds for the American Revolution. Iconic buildings such as the George Washington Masonic Memorial and Gadsby's Tavern are the types of buildings in Alexandria that could be associated with historic shrines, museums, and visitor destinations. The buildings proposed to be demolished are simple utilitarian multi-family structures that are not related to historic figures or events and thus would not be considered as a historic shrine.

3. Is the building or structure of such old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and material that it could not be reproduced or be reproduced only with great difficulty?

The buildings are not of such old, unusual or uncommon design, texture, and material that they could not be reproduced. 1970s building practices used standard and common construction materials that are still widely available today. The design itself is unexceptional and commonplace and these buildings could be very easily replicated. Better local examples of garden apartments include Parkfairfax (Figure 4), Fairlington (Figure 5), and Gunston Hall (Figure 6). The afore-mentioned developments display a higher level of craftsmanship, interesting architectural details, and thoughtful site planning.



Figure 4: Parkfairfax



Figure 5: Fairlington



Figure 6: Gunston Hall

4. Would retention of the building or structure help preserve the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway?

Not applicable. The property is not located along Washington Street, the George Washington Memorial Parkway.

5. Would retention of the building or structure help preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in the city?

These four buildings do not have architectural or cultural significance that would warrant their retention in the city. They do not contribute to an historic place in the city. On the contrary, their construction in the 1970s resulted in the loss of a cohesive, well-established community in the city. The Heritage development was constructed after the razing of a several-block area of a historic traditional African American community founded in the nineteenth century. As such, it represents a period in time when such communities nationwide were purposely and systematically destroyed under the guise of providing public housing.⁴ The Heritage project is one of many constructed during the urban renewal period in Alexandria and across the country.

The appeal raises the question of whether urban renewal and its destructive force is itself of historic interest and worthy of preservation. Even if this were a legitimate question, Heritage of Old Town is poor choice for preservation, because although the resources that were destroyed were a great loss, the existing replacement is not a particularly remarkable example of urban renewal or key to the long term understanding of the impacts of urban renewal on communities.

⁴ Rothstein, Richard, The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), pp. 34 – 37.

6. **Would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare by maintaining and increasing real estate values, generating business, creating new positions, attracting tourists, students, writers, historians, artists and artisans, attracting new residents, encouraging study and interest in American history, stimulating interest and study in architecture and design, educating citizens in American culture and heritage, and making the city a more attractive and desirable place in which to live?**

Visit Alexandria does not include the Heritage or this part of the city in its extensive materials on places to visit and explore; the closest thing is a reference on its website to The Bottoms in a discussion on African American history, which does not apply to these buildings. These buildings do not contain businesses, shops, restaurants, or educational facilities that may attract business, employment, and/or visitors, and they have no architectural or historic significance that would merit study or interest in American history, architecture, or design. Staff has found no record of award-winning or notable designs by this architectural firm. The design does not make the city a more attractive and desirable place to live. Nor do these buildings represent an exceptional design or unique example of urban renewal.

These buildings have not withstood the test of time, and retention would not promote the general welfare of the community. They are not architecturally notable or significant, and they do not attract tourists, students, writers, historians, or artists. The physical buildings do not encourage interest or study in architecture and design, nor do they educate citizens in American history or heritage. Unlike the garden apartment complexes along Washington Street or the 19th century townhouses throughout Alexandria these four buildings do not reflect the historic buildings that routinely appear in marketing materials, tourist publications, or social media.

Staff supports the approval of the requested Permit to Demolish for the four buildings in this complex as set forth above and based on the decision by the Board of Architectural Review.

IV. BOARD ACTION

BOARD ACTION September 2, 2020: Approved as Submitted, 5-1

On a motion by Ms. Irwin and seconded by Mr. Spencer, the Board of Architectural Review voted to approve BAR #2020-00197, as submitted. The motion carried on a vote of 5-1, with Mr. Sprinkle opposing.

CONDITIONS

None

REASON

The Board agreed that the buildings do not meet any of the six demolition criteria.

SPEAKERS

Cathy Puskar, attorney with Walsh, Colucci, Lubeley, Walsh, represented the applicant, gave a brief presentation, and answered questions. She explained the complete notification process and advised that no residents will be relocated prior to September of 2021.

Gail Rothrock, 505 Duke Street, claimed that the buildings to be demolished may be historic and that the City should hire an outside contractor to determine historic significance.

Brian Scholl, 800 Gibbon Street, complained that he could not access the case materials until Monday, 8/31 and argued that the buildings may be historic.

Stafford Ward felt that the height of the proposed development was too high; the Chair advised him to save those comments for the concept review discussion.

Steve Milone, 907 Prince Street, represented the Old Town Civic Association. He stated that 416 South Alfred Street was not included in the project map, meaning that some owners of properties on Wolfe Street had not been notified. He also echoed Ms. Rothrock's comments.

Chris Morell, 421 South Columbus Street, felt that not enough surrounding properties were notified and that demolishing these buildings would significantly degrade the ambience of the Old and Historic District.

Yvonne Callahan, 735 South Lee Street, agreed with Ms. Rothrock and Mr. Milone that the City should hire an outside contractor to assess the potential historic value of the buildings.

Leslie Roberson, 422 South Columbus Street, President of Wilkes Row HOA, discussed the importance of local artisans.

DISCUSSION

Mr. Sprinkle read a pre-written statement discussing the history of the site and its potential historic significance. He felt that the project should have some level of NEPA and/or NHPA Section 106 review and wondered if the existing buildings had to be demolished for the project to move forward. Ms. Puskar explained that HUD specifically indicated that no Section 106 review or environmental assessment was required. She also explained that the project cannot meet the goals of the Small Area Plan, approved in 2018, if the subject buildings remain standing.

Ms. Irwin felt that the 1970s construction of these buildings was undertaken in a discriminatory fashion, and that this project can right the wrongs of the past. She would like to see more historic research, providing a full, rich history. She felt that we can do better by bringing back the previous history while still incorporating the new.

Mr. Spencer appreciated Ms. Irwin's words, noting that we can do better in representing the history that was there. These particular buildings have no historic value. We should focus on what was there prior to their construction.

Ms. Sennott liked the idea of more research, noting that the existing buildings can be better. They feel like segregation. The new proposed design looks more integrated.

Ms. Neihardt felt the subject buildings, while not well built and a symbol of discrimination, are a part of our history regardless of their age. She reluctantly agrees with the demolition.

Ms. Roberts agreed with her colleagues, especially Ms. Irwin and Ms. Neihardt. She noted that the buildings were not made in a way that would meet the preservation criteria. The buildings are not important, but the setting is.

V. STANDARD OF REVIEW ON APPEAL TO CITY COUNCIL

Upon appeal, City Council must determine whether to affirm, reverse or modify, in whole or in part, the decision of the BAR. The City Council's review is not a determination regarding whether the BAR's decision was correct or incorrect but whether the Permit to Demolish/Capsulate should be granted based upon City Council's review of the standards in Zoning Ordinance Section 10-105(B). While City Council may review and consider the BAR's previous actions, City Council must make its own decision based on its evaluation of the material presented. Section 10-107(A)(3) of the Zoning Ordinance requires that the City Council apply the same criteria and standards as are established for the Board of Architectural Review.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that City Council **affirm** the decision of the Board for approval of the Permit to Demolish.

STAFF

Karl Moritz, Director, Department of Planning & Zoning
William Conkey, Historic Preservation Architect
Susan Hellman, Principal Planner, Planning & Zoning

VII. ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: BAR staff report with BAR actions from the [July 15](#) and [September 2, 2020](#) meetings

Attachment B: [Board member John Sprinkle presentation for September 2, 2020 hearing](#)

Attachment C: [Design Guidelines for Demolition of Existing Structures chapter.](#)

Attachment D: [South Patrick Street Small Area Plan](#) See Appendix A.4, pp. 73 – 77, for an analysis of the historic resources.

Attachment E: [Moon, Krystyn R., "The African American Housing Crisis in Alexandria, Virginia, 1930s-1960s." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, v. 124, no. 1.](#)