

**From:** [Susan H. Hellman](#)  
**To:** [Lia Niebaueon](#)  
**Subject:** FW: [EXTERNAL]414 N Union: BAR2021-00005 OHAD  
**Date:** Monday, March 15, 2021 2:24:04 PM

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**From:** alcox@comcast.net <alcox@comcast.net>  
**Sent:** Monday, March 15, 2021 1:54 PM  
**To:** Susan H. Hellman <susan.hellman@alexandriava.gov>  
**Cc:** William Conkey <william.conkey@alexandriava.gov>  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL]414 N Union: BAR2021-00005 OHAD

Madam Chair and Members of the BAR:

Since 1749, virtually every structure in the historic district has had at least one addition and these have often substantially changed the size and architectural character of the original building. However, once the Old and Historic Alexandria District was created in 1946, its primary purpose was to protect the historic fabric and the architectural character of Early buildings, their settings and environs – without precluding additions and alterations that support their continued use. In the case of **Early** (pre 1932) buildings, a fundamental design guideline has been that the original structure should remain the primary focus of attention (they are the reason the district was created) and any addition should be subservient to both the original structure and the neighborhood. While nationally accepted preservation practice dictates that there should be some degree of difference in material and/or design between the existing building and the alteration, that difference should still be compatible with and respect the primary structure.

However, in the case of Later (post 1931) buildings, the BAR has granted a significantly wider latitude for additions, so long as these alterations do not detract from the original structure or nearby buildings of architectural merit. The primary criteria for evaluation of these structures is that they respect the scale and mass of their neighbors and that they improve, or at a minimum be no worse than, the architectural design of the existing building. Some of the most successful additions are so integral to the original design that they are difficult to detect. Unfortunately, that is not the case with the proposed alterations at 414 N Union.

The portion of the OHAD between Queen and Oronoco streets, and between North Lee and North Union streets was constructed by Lawrence Brandt in the 1970s as a subdivision of modest front-loaded garage townhouses constructed in a vernacular Colonial Revival style. Although there are no Early buildings within or adjacent to this immediate area, residents of that neighborhood petitioned the City in 1984 to be included in the OHAD, so that exterior alterations would be reviewed by the BAR, a task normally assumed by homeowner associations for modern developments such as this. Before and after the area became part of the historic district, many alterations were made to these townhouses, both with and without building permits, that would not meet the BAR's 1993 Design Guidelines for architectural compatibility. Large bay windows, dormers and roof decks became popular, as industrial uses were removed from the waterfront and views of the Potomac River substantially increased the value of these dwellings. Approximately 10 years ago, the BAR acknowledged that there were no nearby historic buildings of architectural merit in this

neighborhood, that there was little that could be done about inappropriate windows and dormers installed decades ago, and endorsed substantial additions and alterations to the original architectural style that would not be permitted in any other section of the district ***so long as these alterations were well designed.***

My objections to the proposed alterations to 414 North Union Street are not a debate between contemporary and traditional design. The existing Colonial(ish) townhouse is a late-20<sup>th</sup> century building that has no particular architectural merit. The pedestrian level of the existing facade lacks a visible pedestrian entrance and is dominated by a blank garage door. Nevertheless, the design of the proposed building isn't even as good as the existing building. The North Union Street facade is incoherent and lacks a recognizable hierarchy of architectural features. Because the traditional punched window openings of the existing brick facade are retained, the large plate glass of the proposed bay window and dormer are unrelated to the scale, proportion and detail of the other fenestration on this building and its neighbors.

The result is a design that is neither traditional, nor truly contemporary. The larger glass panes of the proposed 2/2 Victorian window muntin pattern are better than the 6/6 Colonial style shown before but do not improve the proportional dissonance between these and the enormous plate glass windows of the bay and dormer. The typology of the dormer's unbroken ribbon window is typical of an office building, not a townhouse. As an example, the large historic townhouses of the Greek Revival period in Alexandria have a gradation of large windows at the first floor, medium size windows at the second level and small windows at the attic story, creating a handsome perspective from the sidewalk that also explains the uses of the rooms inside. Even traditional masonry warehouses and office buildings had groupings of smaller windows at the attic story that aligned with larger windows below. The proposed building turns this traditional base, middle and top design part on its head with a gargantuan window at the top and a small window at the first floor. This is, in part, because the proposed fourth floor picture window unsuccessfully masquerades as a dormer but has over twice as much glass area than any other dormer on North Union Street. This a primary reason that the BAR has strongly discouraged shed dormer windows on street facing facades of all buildings ever since the Guidelines were adopted in 1993 and denied their use several years ago on a historic townhouse at 115 North Fairfax Street. The proposed fourth floor window at 414 North Union is essentially a modern version of a shed dormer. The energy code requirements for this large wall of glass will cause it to reflect sunlight like a mirror in the morning and it will shine like a lighthouse toward the Potomac River at night. The dormer windows should, at a minimum, be broken into human scale panes of glass divided by substantial mullions aligned with the windows below. Thin muntins recalling steel sash windows can also divide the glass into smaller panes that relate to the scale of their surroundings without obscuring the view of the river from the interior but muntins and mullions are not sufficient to coordinate the fenestration for a cohesive design. There are contemporary design alternatives for organizing this highly visible townhouse facade that do not require demolishing the entire street facing elevation and starting over and the BAR referenced several of these at the previous hearing.

This dwelling was constructed with either a faux side-gable or 19<sup>th</sup> century mansard(ish) style roof but it never was actually either. It is a modern, flat roof. As the fourth floor is being entirely reconstructed as part of this project, it would be far more architecturally honest and integrated with the rest of the building if the brick walls from below were extended to the top of the fourth floor and windows installed within that masonry wall. The BAR unanimously approved this concept several years ago on a similar townhouse alteration within this same neighborhood but that project was, unfortunately, not constructed for unrelated reasons. Extending the masonry wall to the top floor rather than forcing a false sloped roof and outsized dormer would allow a rational window pattern to be aligned with the existing openings on the floors below, including the new fourth floor window above the door on the north façade, and would likely simplify the construction of that floor. A large fourth floor window area could be installed directly above the garage door/bay window tier with a smaller feature window installed on the northern portion of this wall. Alternatively, a large glass door/window combination could be set back from the facade, flush with the cornice line of the sloped roof and behind a small balcony, as has been approved by the BAR several times in Old Town, such as 600 Cameron Street and most recently on the east side of 130 South Union facing Waterfront Park. This alternative would, admittedly, reduce the area of the fourth floor and roof deck but would move the window back so that it no longer dominates the facade.

If this townhouse were on a side street facing a high rise building, the dormer would still be grossly out of scale with the façade but could perhaps be justified in that context. In this case, it is across the street from a heavily used public park and it will establish a precedent for other bad designs that will be extremely difficult for the BAR to deny in the future in other Later neighborhoods such as Yates Gardens. The architect of this proposal is extremely capable and has a history of excellent designs throughout the district. Please defer this case and ask that they develop a more coherent alternate design.

In closing, I also remind the Board that trees may not be considered screening when evaluating a building design, as deciduous trees such as these lose their leaves in the winter and may die or be removed at any time without review by the BAR.

Sincerely,  
Al Cox, FAIA