

HDC 24 May 2010

HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
25 May 2010
Conference Room, City Hall

Members present: R. Burke, N. Goodick, J. Moskal, R. Pino, P. Shea

Vice Chairman Shea called the meeting to order at 7:00 o'clock P.M.

The only item on the agenda was the application of the Cape Ann Historical Association (The Museum), also known as the Cape Ann Museum, for the demolition of the circa 1800 Pearce House located at the corner of Warren and Pleasant Streets, Map 14, Lot 5, and its replacement with a parking area that preserves some parking for the Museum and an "elegantly landscaped 'pocket park' having at its center and engaging sculpture or other art feature".

Vice Chairman Shea outlined the manner in which the meeting was to proceed, giving the applicant one half hour to make its presentation, with an opportunity thereafter for any others in attendance to voice their comments, each individually to do so within a ten minute time frame.

Appearing for the applicant were John D. Cunningham III, Esq., President of the Museum, J. J. Bell, and Clara Batchelor, representing CBA Landscape Architects. Mr. Bell presented an oral summary of the history of the building leading up to its acquisition by the Museum, referring to a report entitled "Historic Building Assessment", commissioned by the Museum. That report was authored by Andrea Gilmore, a preservationist with more than twenty-five (25) years experience, for Building Conservation Associates, Inc., Dedham, Massachusetts, and was filed with The Museum's application and attached to these minutes and made a part hereof. After Mr. Bell's summary, he turned the floor over to Ms. Batchelor to explain the concept of the park and the reasoning behind it.

Ms. Batchelor, referring to a schematic plan entitled "Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, Massachusetts, Park Design" dated 11-18-09, and to a drawing of the proposed pocket park looking at it from diagonally across Pleasant Street, explained the reasoning behind the design which included the enhancement of the views of City Hall, the need for more green space within the downtown civic area, some additional parking for the Museum's use, and an essential tie in with the Museum's current sculpture garden which is located diagonally across Pleasant Street from the proposed pocket park.

Following the applicant's presentation, the Vice Chairman opened the meeting to the public for its comments, asking first if there were any present wishing to speak in favour of the application. There were none present to so do.

The Vice Chair indicated that two letters were addressed to the Commission regarding the proposal. Those letters, which were both in favour of the proposal, were from The Honorable Carolyn Kirk, Mayor of the City of Gloucester, and Councilor Ann Mulcahey.

Prudence Fish, author of Antique Houses of Gloucester, then asked about a letter she had previously submitted to Chairman Porper. The letter, it was noted, was not distributed to the Commission in time for consideration at the meeting; however, it is on file with the Community Development as part of the public record.

The Vice Chair asked if there were any present opposed to the proposal. Mr. Robert Whitmarsh, an historic preservationist, was the first to speak. He indicated that besides the history of the house, there was a definite rhythm of hip roofs in the immediate area, including those of the Museum buildings, which added to the historic character and streetscape of the area as well the rhythm of the buildings in the area.

The next person to speak was Prudence Fish. She summarized the content of her letter opposing the demolition of the Pearce house also know as “The Moose”, and stressed other factors including the fact that the basic original framing of the house was very much in tact and suggested retro fitting the building, which points were also mentioned in her letter, and those points should be included in any deliberations when it comes to demolishing any historic house, especially one in an historic district.

Since there was no further public input, the Vice Chairman closed, the public portion of the meeting. The Vice Chairman then individually addressed each of the members of the Commission for their comments.

The first to speak was Ms. Goodick. In her remarks she indicated that although she understood the historic significance of the original building, its major exterior fabric was no longer extant and it that its proposed demolition and subsequent replacement with green space and some additional parking in the “civic centre district” would be far more beneficial to the area.

The next person to speak was Mr. Pino, who read from the “Historic Building Assessment” as follows:

“The architectural integrity and significance of 26 Pleasant Street have been nearly obliterated by the alterations that have been made to the house by the Cape Ann Order of Moose. The chronology of alterations reveals that the existing building preserves only fragments of its original historic building fabric. On the exterior of the building, the loss of historic building fabric is roughly 95%. Elements lost include: all the clapboards and wood trim, all the windows and their exterior shutters, all the doors, and the two center chimneys. In addition, on the north and east elevations of the first story of the house the original walls have been removed and modern exterior walls constructed at the line of the c. 1925 porch columns.”

The exterior of the 26 Pleasant Street has also been covered with modern, hard cement stucco that has obliterated all of the distinguishing architectural features of the house. This impervious coating has undoubtedly trapped moisture within the wood framing of the walls and caused structural damage that can only be assessed when it is removed.

The moving of the house and construction of the stone retaining wall c. 1925 also significantly changed its original relationship to the street; while the demolition of the historic buildings immediately to its north and south on Pleasant Street have destroyed the house's context within the historic streetscape.

On the interior of the building, with the exception of the third floor, no historic building fabric survives. On the third floor, fragments survive that might be restored. These fragments provide some evidence about the historic interior finishes of the house's chambers, but provide only vague clues about the original finishes on the first and second floors. The finishes on the third floor are very simple finishes, typical of secondary chamber spaces. They provide a dating reference for period appropriate finishes for the first and second floors, but no information about their actual profile and configuration.

The near total destruction of the historic building fabric of 26 Pleasant Street precludes its preservation as an historic house. The architectural significance of the house has been lost and is irretrievable. It could be rebuilt with modern materials to replicate the historic building, but it would essentially be a new building.

By virtue of its location in a National Register District and a Local Historic District, 26 Pleasant Street retains its status as a contributing historic building. For contributing buildings in historic districts that have been destroyed or irretrievably altered like 26 Pleasant Street, the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, which provide national guidelines for preserving historic buildings, generally recommend against reconstruction. The Standards state: Because of the potential for historical error in the absence of sound physical evidence, this treatment (Reconstruction) can be justified only rarely... The Standards further state that, "the reconstructed building must be clearly identified as a contemporary recreation."

Reconstructions are typically approved in a setting that is being recreated to depict a specific time in history, such as the buildings at Colonial Williamsburg. In historic neighborhoods, like Pleasant Street in Gloucester, where the buildings represent a dynamic architectural continuum, good new design to replace a lost historic building is typically the preferred historic preservation goal.

Mr. Pino then said that this was a difficult decision to make, but cited the very strong language contained in the Assessment Report which decried the gradual removal of much of the exterior historic fabric of the building as well as the building of inappropriate additions to the building which further eroded its significance. Mr. Pino did make note of the retention of the original interior of the building on its third floor. He also noted the park and its beneficial addition to the district.

The Vice Chairman then asked Mr. Burke for his comments. Mr. Burke first asked to whose benefit the park was to inure, with a definite assurance by the Museum representatives that it was for that of the public as well as its own. He then asked about the perspective black and white rendering that seemed to envelop the east side of the City Hall in a very park like setting. He noted that he took some pictures of the same scene with his wide-angle lens and was not able to capture all of the elements contained in that rendering, eliciting a response from Ms. Batchelor that indeed a very wide-angle lens was used as the basis of that rendering which would, he indicated would give a rather distorted impression of what was actually proposed. At Burke's request, Ms. Batchelor drew the current footprint of the original part of the existing Pearce House on the presented "Park Design" in order to get a better idea of what was being proposed.

The next point he brought up was the proposed parking and its effect on the area directly abutting the City Hall. Noting that the demolition of the building and the placement of the parking would in essence put an almost eighty foot wide parking lot area between the east wall of City Hall and the proposed park, with a granite wall running the length of the lot from Warren Street to the parking area of the former Burgess and Mackey Funeral Home, separating the existing City Hall parking lot from that of the Museum, and that that area would be far from being attractive, allowing an actual view from the Bank Gloucester building on Middle Street across over three hundred feet of macadam with a view ultimately of the garages where the former Burgess and Mackey Funeral Home hearses were kept, as well as the not too well maintained east wall of City Hall.

The next point he brought up was the plan for the green space itself. He noted that the trees as indicated on the plan would do nothing to mitigate the visual effect of the expansive parking area between the park and City Hall. There were no specifics given as to what its treatment would be, including the kinds of trees, the materials used, and the maintenance of the park. He noted that even though the Commission has no control over such matters, there might well be a factor, be it subconsciously or not, between the landscaping treatment and the approval of the demolition of an historic building. In response to that observation, Ms. Batchelor indicated that the Plan currently before the Commission was only a preliminary plan. Noting that, he further suggested that the design should perhaps have included additional trees along the granite wall dividing the Museum's proposed parking area from that of the City Hall. He asked, because of the amount of area to be covered with macadam, what sorts of trees and plantings could exist under such adverse conditions.

He also felt that the placement of the entrance to the park would affect the definition of the corner of Warren and Pleasant Streets, and noted that the drawings managed to minimize the utility poles in the parking lot areas as well as other utility poles in the area. Ms. Batchelor indicated that the portion of the existing wall defining corner of the intersection of Warren and Pleasant Streets, was not of the same quality workmanship as the portion of the wall that the Museum would retain and that the proposed stepped entrance to the park would enhance the corner's appearance. He also noted that one of the drawings presented at the meeting, which drawing was not included in the materials received prior to the meeting, included the planting of trees along the length of Warren Street with the rhetorical question being posed as to how that was to be accomplished.

Because the plan before the Commission was only a preliminary plan, Mr. Burke asked if the Planning and Zoning Boards would have to also be involved in any decision regarding the proposal, to which an affirmative reply was given. Given the fact that any decision by the Commission must now be recorded in the Essex South Registry of Deeds prior to any of the proposed work in the District being commenced, and the facts that the proposal was only a preliminary one and that the Commission was being asked to approve the demolishing of an historic building, Mr. Burke moved that the Application be continued until such time as a more informed decision could be made.

The Vice Chair then asked Mr. Moskal for his comments. Mr. Moskal is on the City's Clean Energy Commission and a senior advisor for the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency, and is therefore uniquely qualified to address the issues presented by the planned park and parking. He pointed out that the plan presented some problems with respect the water runoff and suggested that the Museum consider the use of more environmentally friendly and esthetically appealing materials for the parking area. Mr. Shea then asked, him because of his background, about the utility poles in the area and whether they could be moved. The reply indicated that that would probably not be an option since they were "cash cows" for the utility companies and would not be moved and/or removed. Mr. Moskal also agreed that the Park and the demolition of the Pearce House would be beneficial to the area as a whole.

The Vice Chairman then expressed his opinion of the request, referring to both the "Historic Building Assessment" filed with the application, his own personal knowledge of the building and site in question, and his knowledge of the Historic District in general over the past 25 years, both as a property owner and member of the Historic District Commission. It was Mr. Shea's opinion that the modifications made and alterations to the exterior and interior were so significant that the proposal to demolish the existing building and to create the proposed parking and parking area would actually be an enhancement to the specific area and to the Historic District in general.

The Vice Chair then summed up the views as expressed by the Commission members, stating that although the Commission had no jurisdiction over the planning of the site, its design would be a factor in considering the demolition of the Pearce House. Mr. Shea also noted that the Museum should consider removing and preserving as much of the original interior fabric of the second and third floors as possible for future use by the Museum a suggestion that the Museum most certainly welcomed. He then suggested that the Museum consider all of the comments made and asked if would return at a later date with a final proposal, to which the Museum replied in the affirmative.

The Vice Chair then asked Mr. Pino if he would care to make a motion regarding the Application. The Secretary reminded the Vice Chair that a motion was on the floor, which had to be acted upon before proceeding. In response to that, Mr. Burke made the following motion:

That the Application of the Cape Ann Historical Association (Cape Ann Museum) be tabled until such time as it could present a plan that would allow a more informed decision regarding its proposal.

The Vice Chair then asked for a second on the Motion.

There being no second, the motion was defeated.

The Vice Chair then entertained a Motion from Mr. Pino on the Application as presented. Pursuant to which the following Motion was made:

That the Application of the Cape Ann Historical Association (Cape Ann Museum) regarding the demolition of the Pearce House and the construction of a parking lot and pocket park be approved, subject to the following conditions:

- 1. That the Cape Ann Historical Association returns seeking final approval of the proposed park and parking area, with plans accurately drawn to scale and with documents containing all specifications regarding the types of plantings to be used in the landscaping, and the materials and their treatments, including the colours and textures proposed for the parking areas,**
- 2. That the Cape Ann Historical Association preserves as much of the original interiors of the second and third floors as possible.**

The floor was then opened for discussion of the motion. Since there was no further discussion, the Vice Chairman asked for a vote on the motion.

Voting in favour: N. Goodick, J. Moskal, R. Pino, P. Shea

Voting against: R. Burke

The Vice Chair, declaring that there were no further matters on the agenda, adjourned the meeting at 8:15 P. M. o'clock.

Respectfully submitted

Robert H. Burke, Secretary