

Docket Item #15
BAR CASE #2004-0196

BAR Meeting
September 23, 2004

ISSUE: After-the-fact alterations

APPLICANT: Fernando Alvarez

LOCATION: 739 Bernard Street

ZONE: RM/Residential

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends approval of the application with the following conditions:

1. That the cornice be removed;
2. That the front windows be replaced with aluminum clad wood casement windows in a configuration closely matching the original steel casement windows;
3. That the window trim and hoods be removed;
4. That the front door be replaced with an appropriate wood door;
5. That the front wall be replaced with an appropriate wood or metal picket fence;
6. That the applicant obtain an encroachment ordinance for any wall or fence located on city property;
7. That the applicant work with Staff to select appropriate replacement windows, door and fence; and,
8. That all of the above be completed within six months of the date of this hearing.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness for a variety of alterations to the facade of the two story brick rowhouse at 739 Bernard Street. The alterations include the following:

1. Installing a cornice;
2. Replacing the metal casement windows with six over six windows;
3. Installing window trim and hoods;
4. Painting unpainted masonry;
5. Alterations to the doorway; and
6. Replacing a wood fence with a 3' high brick wall with iron gate;

II. HISTORY:

739 Bernard Street is a two story, brick faced, end unit rowhouse constructed circa 1948 (Permit #4461, 12/27/1948). This house is part of a row of flat front brick rowhouses that sit at the north end of Michigan Avenue and form a terminus of the community known as Fagelsons's Addition, most of which was constructed in 1939 and 1940. The houses on Bernard Street differ from those in Fagelson's addition in that they were designed in a clearly modern design idiom with rather severe lines, little architectural ornamentation and steel windows with a distinctly horizontal orientation.

Staff recently observed a number of cosmetic alterations to the fronts of the houses in the 700 block of Bernard Street, including window replacement, painting, and installation of trim. By letter dated June 2, 2004, the owners of 739, 737 and 731 Bernard Street were notified of the need to request approval of after-the-fact alterations from the Board of Architectural Review (BAR). Thus far, only 737 Bernard Street has obtained BAR approval. On August 18, 2004, the Board approved a number of alterations at 737 Bernard Street, including painting unpainted masonry and adding window hoods and a cornice, but did not approve the vinyl shutters, which are to be removed (BAR Case #2004-0153).

Subsequent to the June 2, 2004 letter, Staff noted that alterations had been undertaken at 735 Bernard Street and a notification letter was sent on July 26, 2004. Mr. Alvarez, the present applicant is also the owner of the 735 Bernard Street. He has stated that he will make application for the changes made at 735 Bernard Street, but has not done so yet. Similarly, an application has not yet been received for 731 Bernard Street.

Mr. Alvarez purchased the property at 739 Bernard Street in January 1992. He has been before the Board on two previous occasions for alterations to this property. On May 6, 1992, the Board approved a two car garage at the rear of the property (BAR Case #92-29). On January 5, 2000, the Board approved an after-the-fact addition at the rear of the house (BAR Case #99-00229). According to the Staff report for that case, the addition had been constructed in 1992 without the necessary approvals from the Board of Zoning appeals or Board of Architectural Review and without a building permit.

III. ANALYSIS:

The after-the-fact alterations comply with zoning ordinance requirements conditioned upon approval of the encroachment application for the brick wall.

The case is a difficult one for a number of reasons. As explained above, 739 Bernard Street is one of four properties in the row with similar after-the-fact alterations. As constructed, the houses were extremely simple, the result of economical construction for lower income residents and the mid-20th century modern design aesthetic. The spare design of these houses is obviously not appreciated by the current residents, who desire to “improve” the properties by adding architectural features where none existed previously. Many of the alterations at 739 Bernard Street run counter to the *Design Guidelines* and to general historic preservation principles encourage the appreciation of each building as a product of its own time and place and disapprove of alterations which seek to make buildings appear older or more elaborate than constructed. On the other hand, Staff recognizes that a number of the alterations undertaken at 739 Bernard Street would be difficult and or costly to reverse.

Cornice

In the opinion of Staff, the cornice with its dentils, moldings and swag trim is Victorian in character and architecturally inappropriate for the simple mid-20th century building. Made of an unknown material, perhaps Fypon, it does not appear likely to hold up well. It is already dented at the western end. Staff would prefer that it be removed. However, Staff notes that the Board allowed the cornice to remain at 737 Bernard Street, the immediately adjacent house.

Replacement Windows and Window Trim

In the opinion of Staff, the six-over-six windows are an inappropriate replacement for the original metal casement windows. (The applicant has not provided information concerning the material of the new windows). The new windows differ in many respects from the original windows which were modern in character and horizontal in orientation. The new windows, along with the trim and window hoods, make the building appear more ornamented and older than was originally constructed. Staff would prefer replacement windows that more closely matched the original windows. In other cases involving replacement of mid-20th century steel

casement windows, as on the 400 block of Gibbon Street, Staff and Board have recommended aluminum clad wood casement windows with a light pattern similar to the original configuration.

With respect to the trim and hoods, Staff would prefer that the trim be removed and the window opening be returned to its original appearance. However, Staff notes that the Board allowed the same window hoods to remain at 737 Bernard Street.

Painting Facade

According to the *Guidelines*, “the Boards strongly discourage the painting of a previously unpainted masonry surface (Paint Colors - Page 1).” This prohibition is intended to preserve the red brick character of the historic district as a whole, to preserve the original character of the building itself and to eliminate maintenance issues that arise once a building has been painted. Staff notes that within the row of five houses in the 700 block of Bernard Street, the majority are now painted (739, 737 and 731 Bernard Street). Taking into account the fact that the dark red of the paint color is similar to the original brick color and recognizing the difficulty of removing the paint, Staff is willing to recommend that the painting of the building be approved. In addition, Staff notes that the Board allowed the paint to remain at 737 Bernard Street.

Front Doorway

Although not mentioned in the application, the front doorway has been altered with the construction of metal roofed hood and the installation of trim, new storm door and new ornamental wood and stained glass door. Like the alterations to the windows, the doorway changes the character of the simple and modern building. Staff recommends that some or all of the doorway alterations be reversed. At the very least, the Victorian style door should be removed and replaced with a simpler door more appropriate to the architectural character of the house.

Front Wall

The wall is three feet in height with an open brickwork pattern between solid brick piers with cast stone caps. There is a black metal gate with straight pickets and a scrolled top. Ornamental black metal lamps are located on top of the piers on either side of the gate. The wall is more solid and more elaborate than the other fences on the blockface and is not in character with the original design of the house. Therefore, Staff recommends that the wall be removed and replaced with a simple wood or metal picket fence.

According to the applicant, the brick wall recently constructed at the front of the house replaced an existing wood fence. It is in line with the fences that are at the front of the majority of the houses on the blockface. However, all these fences and the subject wall encroach on city property by approximately 2'. There are no records of approval of these encroachments. Therefore, the applicant must seek approval of an encroachment for the existing wall, if the Board should approve it, or any replacement fence located beyond the property line.

IV. Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends approval of the application with the following conditions:

1. That the cornice be removed;
2. That the front windows be replaced with aluminum clad wood casement windows in a configuration closely matching the original steel casement windows;
3. That the window trim and hoods be removed;
4. That the front door be replaced with an appropriate wood door;
5. That the front wall be replaced with an appropriate wood or metal picket fence;
6. That the applicant obtain an encroachment ordinance for any wall or fence located on city property;
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8. That all of the above be completed within six months of the date of this hearing.

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

Legend: C - code requirement R - recommendation S - suggestion F - finding

Code Enforcement:

F-1 There is insufficient information provided to determine the scope of work that was done and whether or not permits are required. The applicant shall contact the Code Enforcement Bureau and provide a list of improvements that were done in order to determine the applicability of permits.

Historic Alexandria:

“The open brick alternating pattern is not something in use in the Old and Historic District. It might be possible to use an iron railing with the brick. Also, this looks out of place on the street face with the rest of the properties.”