

Docket Item # 11
BAR CASE # 2007-0090

BAR Meeting
June 6, 2007

ISSUE: Painting previously unpainted masonry

APPLICANT: Sarah Knutson

LOCATION: 408 Gibbon Street

ZONE: RM/Residential

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends denial of the application.

(Insert sketch here)

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a certificate of appropriateness to paint the previously unpainted red brick rowhouse at 408 Gibbon Street. The applicant has provided paint samples for the Board. The body of the house is to be a deep tan color (Benjamin Moore HC-77, “Alexandria Beige”) and the trim a cream color (Benjamin Moore OC-33, “Opaline”).

II. HISTORY:

408 Gibbon Street is a two story flat front brick residential rowhouse that was constructed in 1954 (Building Permit #6153, 7/2/1954). It is one of a group of three rowhouses at 406, 408 and 412 Gibbon Street that was built for Michael M. Abrams and designed by Joseph Saunders, AIA. This group of three houses was approved by the Board of Architectural Review on July 8, 1954. The houses reflect the influence of the International style with their stark rectilinear proportions, punched window openings and unornamented doors (the door surrounds at 406 and 408 Gibbon Street have been altered).

From the late 1940s through the late 1960s, Joseph Saunders was a prolific and prestigious architect working in Alexandria. The work of his firm included churches, office buildings, shopping centers, schools, public motels (such as the Old Colony Motor Lodge) as well as residential buildings, including much of the public housing located within both historic districts. Joseph Saunders also served as an architect member of the Alexandria Board of Architectural Review.

In recent years, the Board has heard two requests for replacement windows at 408 Gibbon Street for the prior owner. On September 5, 2001, the Board approved aluminum clad wood casement windows to replace the original steel casement windows (BAR Case #2001-0208). The following year the same applicant applied for vinyl replacement windows. The Board denied this request, reiterating its approval of aluminum clad wood windows (BAR Case #2002-0051, 4/17/2002). In case more closely related to the present request, the Board heard a case for various alterations to the façade of 412 Gibbon Street in 1999. The applicant sought to “improve” the appearance of the rowhouse by adding Colonial style elements and by painting the building. The case was deferred for restudy a number of times with the Board finally approving a number of lesser alterations. Due to the objections of Board and Staff, the applicant omitted painting the brick from the revised application that was ultimately approved (BAR Case #99-00172, 11/17/1999). The approved alterations were never undertaken and 412 Gibbon Street remains relatively unaltered.

III. ANALYSIS:

The painting of a masonry building which was unpainted prior to such painting shall be considered to be the removal of an exterior feature having historic and/or architectural significance requiring a certificate of appropriateness (Section 10-109(B)(4)).

If approved by the Board, the proposed painting of masonry complies with the zoning ordinance requirements.

The applicant cites the painting of four of the similar houses across the street on the north side of the block. The row of five, two story, brick clad houses from 413 to 421 Gibbon Street was

constructed circa 1955 (Building Permit #6282, 3/15/1955). The plans for the new houses, also designed by Joseph Saunders, were approved by the Board of Architectural Review on March 10, 1955. As designed they were very similar to the row of three houses on the south side of the block, but had a more traditionally domestic appearance due to the Colonial Revival door surrounds and molded cornice. Over time, the distinction between the north and south side rows has been heightened by the painting of the facades of four of the five houses on the north side. Staff could not locate any record of BAR approval for painting these buildings. Per a Staff report dated 11/18/1992 (BAR Case #92-214), all four were already painted at that date. Painting previously unpainted masonry did not require a certificate of appropriateness until 1992.

Staff believes that it is not necessary or advisable to paint the existing red brick at 408 Gibbon Street. The red brick is in good condition and remains in its original unpainted condition on all three of the rowhouses on the south side. The zoning ordinance requires the Board to approve painting previously unpainted masonry to prevent the loss of the historic red brick character of Alexandria, which extends back to the 18th century. While Joseph Saunder's buildings in Alexandria are typically modern in style and detailing, they invariably employ red brick, linking them to the City's early history through material and color. Alexandria's historic districts grew over time and include buildings from many eras, including many similar small, simple, red brick rowhouses built in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s to house people of modest means. This diversity, which adds interest to Alexandria's streetscapes and helps to tell its story, should be maintained. In recent years, the Board has had a number of requests for alterations to the Saunders rowhouses on both sides of the block and has consistently discouraged attempts to change their architectural character. Painting this red brick house an "Old Town" scheme of tan and cream will definitively alter its appearance. For these reasons, Staff opposes the proposed alteration.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends denial of the application.

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

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

Code Enforcement:

“No comment.”

Historic Alexandria:

No comments.