

Docket Item # 11
BAR CASE # 2008-00035

BAR Meeting
April 2, 2008

ISSUE: Painting previously unpainted brick

APPLICANT: Michelle Gleeson

LOCATION: 423 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 for painting the previously unpainted brick rowhouse at 423 Gibbon Street. The applicant proposes to paint the house a blue color.

II. HISTORY:

423 Gibbon Street is a two story, flat front brick rowhouse constructed ca. 1955. It is one of a pair of twin brick houses separated by a small side yard from five similar rowhouses at 413 to 421 Gibbon Street.

In 2004 the Board approved a rear two story addition for this house and its neighboring duplex at 425 (BAR Case #'s 2004-00165 and 00167, 10/6/2004).

These duplex houses, the row of five houses directly to the east as well as the brick rowhouses directly across the street at 406-412 Gibbon Street were all built in the mid-1950s and were designed by Joseph Saunders, an Alexandria architect.

[423 and 425 were approved by the Board on September 8, 1955; 413 to 421 were constructed circa 1955 (Building Permit #6282, 3/15/1955) and approved by the Board of Architectural Review on March 10, 1955; 406, 408 and 412 were constructed ca. 1954 (Building Permit #6153, 7/2/1954, Michael M. Abrams, builder) and approved by the Board of Architectural Review on July 8, 1954.]

Of the seven houses in the row on the north side of the street, five are currently painted and the owner of 425 Gibbon Street will shortly be applying for a Certificate of Appropriateness to paint the twin unit

Over the past twenty years the Board has taken differing stances on the two requests that have been considered to paint Joseph Saunders designed houses on these facings blocks. In 1992 the Board approved by a unanimous vote the painting of the previously unpainted brick rowhouse next door at 421 Gibbon Street (BAR Case #92-00214, 11/18/92). Last year, the Board denied the painting of the previously unpainted brick house at 408 Gibbon Street (BAR Case #2007-0090, 6/6/2007).

All of these houses share a similar design and ethic and, in the opinion of staff, are important works of modernist architecture in the historic district that reflect modernist architecture tradition in the United States

423 Gibbon Street As An Exemplar Of Modernism Housing

Joseph Saunders, the architect of these Gibbon Street rowhouses, was trained as a modernist at GSD at Harvard University under Walter Gropius, one of the principals of the Bauhaus who ended up in Cambridge in the late 1930s. Following World War II, Gropius explored modernist architectural ideas and the use of concrete as a principal building material for public housing in

Chicago following the lead of his protégé in the Bauhaus Marcel Breuer who made extensive use of concrete as a dynamic building material. Within this background Saunders made use of the work of Breuer with concrete and Gropius with replicable public housing units.

The Gibbon Street houses reflect the influence of what Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock in their landmark exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1939 labeled the International style, but more generally called modernism, with their stark rectilinear proportions, punched window openings and general lack of ornamentation.

This modernism in architecture was led by Le Corbusier. Many of his ideas on urban living became the blueprint for post World War reconstruction and as well the many failures of modernism and much of the blame for the problems of western cities in the 1960s and 1970s is attributed to his ideas. Le Corbusier was convinced that a rationally planned city, using the standardized housing types he had developed, could offer a healthy, humane alternative. The Gibbon street rowhouses generally mirror the promise, hope and subsequent disillusionment with modernism.

Saunders incorporated a number of the Bauhaus principles of modernism expressed in housing in the designs of the Gibbon street rowhouses including: standardized design to allow easy reproduction of simple, interchangeable building materials; proportional geometry; absence of historical ornament; abstraction of design elements; factory metal casement windows echoing industrial architecture and providing openness and light and individual garden areas for each house. These modernism aspects were overlaid by Saunders with a *patois* of Colonial Revival brick veneer. In this sense Saunders was delivering on Le Corbusier's dictum of the house as a machine for living and inserting the modernist philosophy unbidden into the core of an existing 18th century city.

This enclave of Saunders designed houses is similar to his approach to public housing. For example, Saunders' modernist approach is also evident in his designs for the Samuel Madden Homes, the James Bland Homes public housing project of the same era in 1954 and the James Bland Addition project from 1959. Like the Gibbon Street rowhouses these units of public housing "combine sterile aspects of function-based modern architecture with the aesthetics of garden apartment siting, all with a modest sprinkling of Colonial Revival style details," as noted in the current National Register nomination form for the Uptown Parker-Gray District.

Sanders clearly set forth this modernist philosophy in the design statement that he and his firm articulated for their master plan work for the George Mason campus of the University of Virginia (now George Mason University) in Fairfax in the 1960 Master Plan of essentially the same period as the Gibbon Street rowhouses. The approach to building materials continues the modernist philosophy emphasizing easily replicable economical, low cost building materials.

Building Design:

As in all building design, the exterior form of these proposed buildings generates from and is a direct reflection of the simple concrete structural framing system proposed, and a direct reflection of the plans and the function of the various rooms. Effort has also been made to reflect the materials and scale that Thomas Jefferson employed in the University buildings at Charlottesville. Further, since the design expression made in Stage I will establish that for the entire development in the years to come, considerable study has been made and development in the years to come, considerable study has been made and care taken to create a design with College character, one with the same kind of freshness, straight forwardness and honesty of purpose as found in the Jeffersonian works at Charlottesville, yet one of simplicity, permanence and economy.

The materials then are brick with white or off-white trim of white vinyl coated smooth concrete, enameled steel windows and masonry panels. These materials are inexpensive, yet relatively maintenance free.

Preliminary structural investigations of structural framing systems indicate that concrete construction with concrete plate slabs will be the most economical and logical method of building. This frame would then be enclosed with brick and the panel-window assembly indicated above.

Saunders residential design philosophy of this era stands in marked contrast to the design of other contemporaneous residential building that was taking place in the historic district. For example, the same era houses in the Yates Garden subdivision just a few doors to the south of the Gibbon street rowhouses of the same era were planned with substantial Colonial revival ornamentation and a design aesthetic that reflected past eras rather than a new design philosophy.

The severity of the modernist design housing aesthetic has been mollified by the generations of owners of the Gibbon Street rowhouses who have added embellishment and decoration to the generally unrelieved angularity of the elevations. For example, the door surrounds of some of

the houses such as at both 423 and 425 as well as 406 and 408 Gibbon Street have been altered with off the shelf style Colonial Revival detailing



Joseph Saunders, Architect

Saunders had a long and varied career in Alexandria from the 1940s through the late 1960s. His firm was prolific and included a wide variety of projects in the metropolitan area including churches, office buildings, shopping centers, schools, motels (such as the now demolished Old Colony Motor Lodge); the Jefferson Building at 901 North Washington Street; Alexandria Courthouse, 520 King Street; as well as residential buildings, including much of the public housing located within both historic districts; as well as the original master plan for what is now George Mason University in Fairfax. Saunders himself served as an architect member of the Alexandria BAR and was the Chairman in the late 1950s into 1960s. The firm was later Saunders and Pearson (Charles Almond Pearson, FAIA)

In the later 1940s Saunders office was in the Rupley bldg, 815 King Street, which has recently been remodeled into a mixed use commercial / residential project.

III. ANALYSIS:

The applicant cites the painting of four of the similar houses at the east end of the block as a justification for painting this house.

However, staff believes that it is not necessary or advisable to paint the existing red brick at 423 Gibbon Street. The red brick is in good condition and remains in its original unpainted

condition. 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 Saunders 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" blue scheme 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 comments received.

Historic Alexandria:

No comments received.