

**REPORT OF THE ARCHITECTURAL COMMITTEE
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION
24 July 2007
CITY HALL, ROOM 578
9:30 A.M.**

PRESENT

Rudy D'Alessandro
Suzanne Pentz
Robert Thomas, AIA
Dan McCoubrey, AIA
Daniela Voith, AIA

Jonathan Farnham, Acting Historic Preservation Director
Randal Baron, Historic Preservation Planner III
Jorge Danta, Historic Preservation Planner II
Erin Cote, Historic Preservation Planner II
Rebecca Sell, Historic Preservation Planner I
Karen Gonski, Administrative Technician

ALSO PRESENT

Hyman Myers, FAIA, Vitetta
Jamie Swidler, In House Studio
Diana Nicholas
Liz Blazeovich, Preservation Alliance
Van Strother, New Covenant Church
Kevin Smith, Manayunk Neighborhood Council
Sandy Sorlien, Manayunk Neighborhood Council
Laura Siena, West Mt. Airy Neighbors
Stephen Varenhorst, Stephen Varenhorst Architects
Drew Kmetz, Stephen Varenhorst Architects
James Morrissey, Stephen Varenhorst Architects
Guillermo Lei
David Hollenberg, AIA, University of Pennsylvania
Ann Beha, ABA
Philip Chen, ABA
Kahled Tarabieh, University of Pennsylvania
John Gallery, Preservation Alliance
Eric Poulain
Timothy Calligan, Aegis Property Group
Betty Mon, Mon & Associates
Michelle McAleese, YCH Architects
Jeff Krieger, Krieger Architects
Peggy Conner, Chestnut Hill Academy
Cynthia Padilla, Krieger Architects
Jeffrey M. Laufer, JMLAA
Alyson Herman
Dan Russoniello, Archer & Buchanan Architects
Jonathan Tori
Cynthia Ray

John Kontra
Brett Harmon, Harmon Deutsche Architects
Rustin Ohler, Harmon Deutsche Architects

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Thomas called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. Mses. Pentz and Voith and Mr. McCoubrey joined him on the Architectural Committee. Mr. D'Alessandro joined the Committee while the meeting was in progress.

1 LEVERINGTON AVENUE

Owner: Venice Island Realty

Philadelphia Management; Lubert-Adler Partners; Neducsin Properties

Applicant: Stephen Varenhorst, AIA

History: large open space with c. 1995 restaurant building
in Main Street Manayunk District

site of mill buildings, which were demolished between 1929 and 1945

Project: Construct residential complex

OVERVIEW: This application proposes to construct four buildings containing 280 condominium units on a 4.5 acre site on Venice Island, which is situated between the Schuylkill River and the Manayunk Canal. The site runs from the Paul Cret-designed Green Lane Bridge west to Leverington Street. The site is almost entirely vacant. The only structure on it is a unoccupied, non-historic restaurant building, which was erected in the 1990s. This building would be demolished as part of the project.

Major textile manufactories including the Crompton, Wabash, Arcola, and Eagle Mills were located on the site. A densely packed collection of five to seven-story, water-powered, masonry, mill buildings stood along the river and the canal, occupying all of the usable land. The first were erected prior to the Civil War. The mills were expanded throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. The mills still stood when the stock market crashed in 1929, but had been completely demolished by 1945.

The new condominium buildings would be six stories and 89 feet tall and would stand on columns raising the first floor 19 feet above grade and the flood plain. The architectural style is contemporary. The exterior would be clad in white and brown wood grain panels. Parking is planned on grade beneath and around the raised structures. Each unit would have a private deck as well as access to a common roof deck.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Approval, pursuant to Manayunk Ordinance Section PM-704.2.7, "Design: Additions, alterations, and new construction shall be designed so as to be compatible in scale, building materials, and texture, with contributing buildings in the historic district."

DISCUSSION: Ms. Sell presented the proposal to the Committee. Architects Steven Varenhorst and James Morrissey represented the application.

Mr. McCoubrey asked Ms. Sell to read the pertinent section of the Manayunk ordinance. Ms. Sell replied that it mandates that "new construction shall be designed so as to be compatible in scale, building materials, and texture, with contributing buildings in the historic district."

Mr. Varenhorst presented two photographs of the site before the demolitions of the mill buildings. He explained that, owing to the significant potential for flooding, the new buildings must be raised off the ground. They are 89 feet tall to the top of the four-foot parapet. The first floors are 19 feet above grade to allow fire trucks to pass under the buildings. He stated that he endeavored to reduce the masses of the buildings. They are 44 feet wide, not the 60 or 70 feet that is typically specified for buildings of this type. The private roof decks cut into the buildings, giving them a varied roof line and reducing the mass. The buildings are arranged asymmetrically on the site, adding variety. Mr. Thomas asked how the complex fit into the historic district. Mr. Varenhorst contended that the buildings are consistent in scale, massing and arrangement with the historic mill buildings that stood on Venice Island.

Ms. Voith stated that the application was incomplete. She explained that she owns a home six blocks up the hill from the site and would work diligently to protect her neighborhood from unwanted intrusions. She stated that, in order to fully evaluate the proposal, she would need a section drawing from the river, through the site, canal, and train yard, and up the hill to the residential area. She stated that without such a drawing she would deem the application incomplete. Mr. Morrissey showed two photomontages included in the application that placed the proposed complex in panoramic photographs of the area. He contended that these photomontages accurately depicted the impact of the construction on the area. Ms. Voith rejected the photomontages, asserting that Photoshop, a digital imaging software package, could be used to manipulate and deceive. She claimed that the complex would have a detrimental impact on the residential neighborhood up the hill. Mr. Varenhorst stated that the railroad viaduct, which is very tall, and former railroad yard stand between the site and the residential neighborhood up the hill. Mr. Farnham presented a large map of the Manayunk Historic District, which demonstrated that the residential area is outside the district's boundaries.

Mr. Varenhorst presented a 4' x 8' model of the complex. The Committee moved from the conference table to the model. Ms. Voith questioned the accuracy of the model. She stated that the historic mill buildings would not have been as tall as the proposed buildings. Mr. Farnham presented a bird's-eye view of historic Manayunk, which showed that the historic mill buildings on the island between the river and the canal were five or six stories tall.

Mr. Thomas asked about the connection to the Green Lane Bridge, which had been mentioned. The applicant responded that they may connect to it with a stair, but noted that the connection was not part of this application.

Ms. Voith again objected to the design and stated that it proposed a radical shift in scale, proportion and rhythm from the two to four-story buildings on Main Street east of Green Lane. Others countered that this site is not within that context, but would be located in the historic mill area, which differs greatly from that of Main Street. Ms. Voith objected to the landscaping depicted in the model. She contended that the complex included too much paving and not enough green space. Mr. Varenhorst disagreed. He stated that much more of the site was proposed as green space than is required by zoning. He stated that 40% of the site would be open area. He noted that his design team had strived to move the roadways away from the river and canal to allow for more green space. All other architects' designs for the site had situated the streets at the water's edge, leaving no space for the public to appreciate the waterfront. Mr. Varenhorst explained that the flood plain code required that the buildings be raised above grade; he had raised them slightly higher to allow fire trucks to pass under them, obviating the need for driveways along the water. He asserted that the slight addition to the height was a worthwhile trade-off for the open waterfronts. Ms. Voith asserted that the applicant was not being truthful and his model was deceptive. She held up a drawing from the application and claimed that it showed that 20%, not 40%, of the site would remain open. She claimed that this drawing demonstrated that the applicants were being dishonest. Mr. Morrissey explained that Ms. Voith had misinterpreted the drawing. It was a drawing of the lot coverage allowed by the zoning for the site, which is 80%, not a drawing of their proposed development. He stated that the zoning code requires that 20% of the site remain open; they are proposing to leave 40% of the site open. Ms. Voith conceded this point, but asserted that the proposed landscaping is not appropriate. Mr. Varenhorst objected to Ms. Voith's repeated assertions that he and his colleagues were not being honest with the Committee; he stated that they were being completely forthright.

Kevin Smith of the Manayunk Neighborhood Council stated that the scale of the proposed complex is foreign to the district. He stated that, if built, the complex would be a detriment to Manayunk and the landmark bridge. He contended that the expanse of parking gives the complex the appearance of a suburban mall. Mr. Smith stated that the buildings on sticks have no relationship to the canal, river, or bridge.

Sandy Sorelien of the Manayunk Neighborhood Council stated that she is an urban planner and an architectural photographer. She stated that the view of Manayunk from the expressway will be blocked. If this complex is built, Manayunk will look like Conshohocken. Mr. Varenhorst stated that he had strived to fragment the complex, which could have appeared massive. He noted again that the buildings are narrow, 44 feet wide, not 60 or 70 feet wide. He pointed to view corridors between the buildings and stated that the historic views to and from Manayunk would be maintained.

Ms. Voith stated that the recommendation was denial. Other Committee members requested an opportunity to discuss the proposal further. Ms. Voith asked again why the buildings are lifted 19 feet off the ground. Mr. Varenhorst again explained about the flood zone and fire trucks.

Mr. Smith submitted two photographs of pre-cast panels on an unidentified building and stated that they were the same panels these architects planned to use. He stated that they were an inappropriate dark brown in color and claimed that the color in the model was not accurate. Mr. Morrissey looked at the photographs and stated that the panels represented in them were nothing like those they planned to use on this development.

Mr. Thomas stated that he is concerned by the proposed height of these buildings, but understands the need to raise them above the flood-prone land. Mr. Smith interjected that the piers on which the buildings would stand are six feet taller than required by the flood code. Mr. Varenhorst again stated that he raised the buildings higher to accommodate fire trucks and avoid running roads along the water. Ms. Sorelien stated that the regularity of the height is problematic. She suggested that the heights of the buildings be varied like those in Manayunk. Mr. Varenhorst stated that he had varied the arrangement and had broken down the individual masses with balconies and changes in materials.

Mr. McCoubrey summarized his opinions. He stated that, overall, the design was nicely executed. However, he had four suggestions. The height should be reduced. The heights of the buildings should be more varied. The buildings at the eastern end of the complex should be arranged in a more varied manner. And the exterior material should be considered carefully. Ms. Pentz agreed with Mr. McCoubrey. She stated that the overall project was well executed. She suggested reducing the height of the buildings. She noted that she would like to see a sample of the cladding material. Mr. Thomas concurred. He complimented the site plan. He suggested varying the heights of the buildings, which would not result in the loss of any units. He also asked to see samples of cladding materials. Ms. Voith apologized for "being direct" and acknowledged that the architects had expended a great amount of effort in the design. She again stated that the recommendation must be denial and requested that any subsequent application include information about the impact of the complex on the residential area on the overlooking hill.

ARCHITECTURAL COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION: The Architectural Committee voted to recommend denial.