

Elizabeth Spencer Adams
49 Merrill Street
Portland, ME 04101

Planning Board
Planning and Urban Development Department
Planning Division
City of Portland
389 Congress St
Portland, ME 04101

Re: 30 Merrill Street

October 21, 2016

To the Members of the Planning Board and Planning Division Staff:

My husband Peter and I live at 49 Merrill Street. We also own a two-family house at 51 Merrill and an empty lot across from our house at 46 Merrill. We attended the neighborhood meeting, the initial Planning Board hearing on this project and the follow up meeting with the developers and the architect earlier this week.

I would like to present again our position regarding the main entrance to the building. The following is a revised version of the position set forth in the neighborhood October 4, 2016 letter to the Board.

Revisions are in italics

Design Standard C-1 states: "Emphasize and orient the main entrance to the street." The street entrance to this building is not a main entrance at all. In fact, it is an entrance to the basement that contains only storage areas for the units. ***Although it is possible, as the developer argues, to enter, descend to the basement, walk to the back of the building and then climb the stairs to the units, this seems highly unlikely given the human desire to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible.***

The rear entrance will, in fact, be the main entrance to the building and it does not orient to the street. It seems to be the argument that so long as it looks like a main entrance (which has certainly been improved through the planning process and neighborhood input) that is enough. It is not. There is a rationale behind this design standard that has been well articulated by numerous urban designers (Jan Gehl , Cities for Real People; Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities; Christopher Alexander, A Pattern Language), planners and articulated in municipal standards. The rationales relate to the life of the street, community, walkability, and the safety of the inhabitants and passersby.

The interaction between people living on and walking along a street happens at the front door and in the “transition space” between the sidewalk and the door. People pause at the front door to find their keys and someone walking by says hello. A conversation starts and they linger chatting for a few minutes, community begins to form and street life is enhanced. In the proposed design, the residents will use the front door only for storage purposes, occasionally putting a bike in or out a few months of the year, pulling out the snow tires, grabbing skis for a weekend trip. This is not the 2, 3, 4, 5 times a day in and out of a building to go to work, run for groceries, make a trip to the gym, etc. that happens from the true main entrance to a building. Instead, they will enter the building at the back, unseen by passersby, a much less safe proposition, and much less likely to result in contact with the neighborhood. And will they linger at the sidewalk? Not if they are already in their car, of course, and even if on foot, they will have already begun their walk to wherever they are going and are not in a transition space and are far less likely to pause. Jane Jacobs explains that

A central challenge of [a] city, therefore, is to make its inhabitants feel safe, secure, and socially integrated in the midst of an overwhelming volume of rotating strangers. The healthy sidewalk is a critical mechanism for achieving these ends, given its role in preventing crime and facilitating contact with others.

Standard C-1 requires that the main entrance either be at the front of the building or on a covered porch to the side that extends all the way to the front of the building. It makes a mockery of this design standard to interpret it to mean that something that looks like a front door is good

enough. It also fails to add to the city's goal of walkability and health. Sam Newburg in his 2014 article "Front Doors and Walkable Cities" writes:

A city that is genuinely trying to be walkable must not only build public infrastructure that truly prioritizes the pedestrian, not just accommodates them, but also has buildings that relate well to those streets, and therefore front doors are very important. In a perfect world, a common sense approach would suffice; if the developer, architect and planning commission agree they'd be comfortable walking in and out of that door every day, then it is probably good enough.

The current design cannot even attempt to pass the test of "be[ing] comfortable walking in and out of that door every day" because it is not actually a main entrance that one will walk in and out of on any regular basis. That it might be dressed up to look like a main entrance is most definitely not good enough.

Finally, on this point of where the true main entrance is sited, the requested waiver for a narrowed driveway aisle makes stopping to visit even less likely for a resident who must take care not to be hit by a fellow resident turning into or coming out of the driveway. Many design standards require a full walkway in the event that an entrance to a building is at the back so people coming and going are not walking along a driveway. Not having a walkway is bad enough; narrowing the driveway is clearly unsafe.

In summary, the interpretation of the main entrance to mean "looks like a main entrance" is not in keeping with the governing design standards. We request that if the plan is otherwise to be approved by the Board that it be approved with the condition that the front door in fact be the main entrance. Otherwise, we ask that a waiver or variance or whatever is the appropriate planning procedural tool be used to make it clear that this is an exception to the main entrance rule, not an interpretation of the standards that the Board will employ in the future unless adequately compelling reasons exist and an appropriate waiver/variance is obtained. The last thing we

need is a number of large buildings on a street of predominantly small residential homes, all with much greater number of residents than is typical and entrances in the back. We welcome carefully designed density, but we need to be able to interact with our new neighbors in a way that allows us to weave them into the friendly and diverse neighborhood that we, the current residents, and hopefully future residents as well, enjoy.

Thank you for your consideration.

Elizabeth (Lisa) and Peter Adams
49 Merrill Street

cc: Evan Carroll