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Planning Board
Portland, Maine

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To whom it may concern:

I am an owner-occupant at my property at 45 Quebec Street, an abutter to the proposed multi-family project for 30 Merrill Street, and I attended the public meeting held by architect Evan Carroll and developer Michael Boissoneau on August 15th at East End School. As a neighbor I consider myself a significant stake-holder in how new development affects the fabric of the much-valued community that currently exists in the East End. I am in no way opposed to new development or appropriate changes to the existing fabric of the neighborhood. As a stake-holder I am sensitive to architectural interventions' potential to add value to the context of the existing neighborhood, or conversely to potentially work against making the neighborhood even better.

My impressions from attending the public meeting on August 15th are not entirely reflected in the notes provided by the presenters as part of the public record. I heard numerous comments from attendees about the project as presented not being respectful of the existing fabric and context of the neighborhood, and no comments in favor of the presented architectural renderings for use at this site. Comments from the record included:

"It's a big square ugly block", "This is an embarrassment to the neighborhood with no context. Its cheap looking and unimaginable.", "Can tell EC and MB are passionate about the project, just wish it would be put to good use.", "I appreciate the design, just not in this location.", "just wished the project had more respect for the neighborhood."

There were further negative comments, the discussion became quite heated and Mr Carroll ended up stopping discussion of aesthetics, contextuality and respecting neighborhood fabric. Mr Carroll then asked for other areas for comment only, stating that he takes his design efforts very seriously and he made it clear that attendee comments were personally difficult for him. I believe that comments were terminated preliminarily, and this gives me concern that this permitting/planning process may not fully allow meaningful community input.

Mr Carroll did report that early comments from Planning staff had asked for more contextualism (not reflected in the minutes), and he stated that he planned to address such concerns in subsequent design presentations to the Planning Board. I have since reviewed the architect's resubmittal that Helen Donaldson has sent to me, and I do not perceive any significant changes to allow the project to fit in with its neighbors more successfully. I again raise concerns whether community concerns may go unheeded.

My personal concerns about the project are entirely about what kind of neighbor this property will be on Merrill Street and beyond. I don't have any issues with the scope or scale of the property or creating greater density at this site - those are broader Portland Planning goals that I support. I am fine with the building's massing. The almost complete lack of contextual elements as presented in the preliminary AND revised renderings are my biggest concern: the vertical balcony elements that Mr Carroll states in his Design Standards Assessment as "stacked and articulated to pay homage to the traditional bay window" entirely unconvincing from reviewing his renderings. Similarly, the standing-seam cladding is a material alien to the streetscape, and the scale of the cladding elements is out-of-scale with local materials, so that his argument that the horizontality of the cladding makes it appear contextual is unconvincing as well.

In order to actually be contextual, I believe the siding should be actual clapboard or shingle elements - abstract "homages" that are not evident to a room full of neighbors viewing the renderings are not meeting criteria for being contextual. Similarly, the fenestration is also entirely out of synch with residential architecture on the Hill, as the renderings made evident. Abstract language attempting to substantiate contextualism needs to be evident to real people who live on the street and the city.

This project seems to fit the cliché of a "box that dropped out of the sky" – the opposite of contextual. Mr Carroll made a strong argument for new construction in Portland to be forward-looking, with which I agree. I would never say additions to the neighborhood need to look like they were always there, however Mr Boissoneau stated in the meeting that context is subjective, to which I replied it can also be objectively assessed, which is what I am advocating for here. The proposed project does not appear to be trying to be contextual. There are numerous examples on the Hill of new construction that is both forward-looking and contextual. To suggest that this project is one of them would be disingenuous. Mr Boissoneau stated that "We want the neighborhood to be accepting of it" (the design). I question why the essentially same design was resubmitted if this is the intent.

Mr Carroll lists "ingenuity, thoughtfulness, empathy" on his logo/letterhead, however I do not believe his responses thus far to public comment give evidence of sincere efforts to adapt to neighbors' concerns. I do not understand how Mr Carroll can state at the public meeting that he intends to address Planning staff and meeting attendees' concerns about contextualism, and then resubmit his design without substantive changes to address these.

As a neighbor and stake-holder who cares deeply about the future of my neighborhood, I expect to remain involved with the existing process for this and future additions to our great neighborhood. I am hoping that the involvement of stakeholders like myself has potential to positively influence how this proposed project contributes to our neighbor and great city.

Respectfully submitted,

Bruce Davis