



May 24, 2016

Ms. Laura DiPasquale  
Historic Preservation Planner  
Philadelphia Historical Commission  
1515 Arch Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Dear Ms. DiPasquale,

I am writing on behalf of Robyn Willner, the owner of 2012 and 2014 Rittenhouse Square, to respectfully request that the designation of these two houses be reconsidered. The properties are currently designated as “contributing” to the Rittenhouse/Fitler Historic District, however, the houses offer evidence to the contrary.

The twin, two-story, 900sf structures, built in the early 1950s, do not contribute to the Historic District in terms of their architectural character or their scale, they are not consistent with the spatial hierarchy of the neighborhood and they do not support the social unity of the district as defined by the District Nomination Application.

The application clearly sets out the importance of both architectural scale and quality of design to the continuity of the district:

The architectural unity of the region is fostered both by the residential use and scale, apparent in the typical three- and four-story flat façaded brick houses, and by the high quality of architectural design of the neighborhood.

The existing size of 2012 and 2014 Rittenhouse Square is particularly inappropriate in relation to the spatial hierarchy of the neighborhood, which is cited in the Nomination Application as an essential part of the character of the Historic District:

Overlaying the two principal lines of development was the hierarchical organization of space, which reflected the value of real estate in Philadelphia. That hierarchy generally runs from the south edge of the district, where typically smaller houses occur, towards the middle, where the larger houses are found, with the most important in the immediate vicinity of Rittenhouse Square.



In general terms, the desirability of proximity to Rittenhouse Square has resulted in the construction of some of the larger houses in the district. There is a continuity of these historic forces today and the proposed project for this location can be considered an expression of this aspect.

Some might argue that this particular block of Rittenhouse Square was a service street for Spruce Street and that the houses should remain diminutive for this reason. However, as can be seen in city maps prior to the 1860s, three-story brick houses on the 2000 block of Rittenhouse Square (then called Murray Street) predated any houses on the corresponding block of Spruce Street. Later, the houses at the current location of 2012 and 2014 Rittenhouse Square were demolished and their land was joined to the property of the new mansion at 2013 Spruce Street. Subsequent city maps show that the land where the demolished houses had stood remained vacant until the properties were separated again in the 1950s.

The joining of these properties to the Spruce Street property was a temporary condition that should not diminish the understanding of the importance of the property's proximity to Rittenhouse Square. A larger house on a property fronting Rittenhouse would be in accordance with the spatial character of the overall district, as described in the Nominating Application. The change of name from Murray Street to Rittenhouse Square in the early part of the last century is testament to the desire to connect this street to the Square and all it entails.

The Nomination Application also cites the "social unity" of the district as an essential part of what "...makes this a cohesive and complete district" and ascribes this to the fact that it is "... the only continuously successful fashionable urban neighborhood in the city's history." This aspect ties with the importance of the "high quality of architectural design" noted previously.

The attached photographs of the existing 2012 and 2014 Rittenhouse houses reveal some serious deficiencies with regard to the quality of the architectural design. Specific examples are the feeble detailing at the cornice, the inappropriately sized window shutters, the "worm-like" textured bricks, the incongruous bay window and the unsightly entrance ornamentation.

The inappropriateness of these elements becomes glaringly clear when compared to the Nomination Application's description of the general level of architectural quality and the intent of the architects and their clients that can be seen throughout the Rittenhouse neighborhood.



...unlike the architects of North Philadelphia, they followed the formal and theoretically disciplined notions of John Ruskin, producing an architecture of structured realism and material honesty. It is this which limited the frequent excesses of 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural taste, and ultimately contributed to the long term survival of Rittenhouse: for unlike North Philadelphia, which built at the outer limits of contemporary taste, this clientele demanded sufficient conservatism so that the region ultimately attained a continuity and unity rare in 19<sup>th</sup> century American cities.

The owner seeks a designation of “noncontributing” so these drab, inappropriate structures can be removed and a three-story, single-family house can be built in their place. The intent is to construct a home with a scale and architectural character that is appropriate to the spatial hierarchy and urban fabric of the historic district.

The proposed front elevation of the house is attached. We hope to work with the Historical Commission staff, the Architectural Committee and the Commission to develop the design and materials of the house in the most appropriate manner possible. In so doing, we believe we would contribute towards the strengthening of the character of the Rittenhouse/Fitler Historic District.

Thank you for your consideration of this project.

Sincerely,

Timothy Kerner, AIA