

February 6, 2024

Laura DiPasquale  
Philadelphia Historical Commission  
1515 Arch St, Philadelphia, PA 19102  
(Transmitted via email: laura.dipasquale@phila.gov)

Dan McCoubrey  
Architectural Committee chair  
Philadelphia Historical Commission  
1515 Arch St, Philadelphia, PA 19102  
(Transmitted via email)

RE: REQUEST TO RETURN APPLICATION TO THE ARCHITECTURAL  
COMMITTEE  
AND/OR STAY REVIEW BY THE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Meeting: February 9, 2024 (Old Business)

Address: 208-10 Rex Avenue – REVISED

Applicant: Jeffrey Watson, BartonPartners

Dear Ms. DiPasquale and Mr. McCoubrey:

I am chair of a neighborhood nonprofit group, Rex Avenue Neighbors Association (RANA), that was founded in 2018 to address concerns about development at 208-210 Rex Avenue in Chestnut Hill – a property that, as you know, has been listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places since February 2021 as the William L. Hirst/Louis I. Duhring House.

I am writing today to alert you to our concern that the site plan for the above-captioned project reviewed by the Architectural Committee in December, when the committee voted to recommend “approval in-concept of the freestanding houses, with the staff to review details” has been materially altered to an extent and scope that go beyond the type of reviewable staff-level “details.”

Based on our review of the applicant’s most recent plan revisions, one of the two proposed new detached structures has moved approximately 25 to 30 feet closer to Rex Avenue and well beyond the back half of the property. Given our group’s goal of protecting the preeminence on the site of the historic house and its “expansive lawn” (as your committee described it three years ago) by limiting new construction to the back of the property, we believe that the latest plan changes represent substantial, material

alterations to what was reviewed and approved “in concept” by the Architectural Committee.

In light of the significance of the proposed revisions, we respectfully request that the Commission direct the Architectural Committee to re-evaluate the proposal for what it is: a materially altered proposal. If that is not possible, we ask that the Commission withhold its final approval at this month’s meeting, or that it exclude the location of the new construction from any approval it grants and suggest that PHC staff and the community continue to work on those elements of the project before final approval.

In particular, a comparison of the zoning plan reviewed by the Architectural Committee in December with the revised plan now before the Historical Commission for “Final Approval” reveals that the plan will both decrease the historically significant lawn area and irreparably alter the relationship of the new structures with the historic house, whose preeminence on the site RANA has aimed to preserve.

I should add that RANA has worked cooperatively for many months with the How Group, and — up until these latest material revisions — we have generally appreciated their responsiveness to our concerns and had hoped that by now we would primarily be lending support to their plans as they proceed through the various community processes.

Fundamentally, the scope and timing of their latest changes – we saw the site plan substantially revised on Jan. 10, 2024, and again on Jan. 19, 2024 – raise serious concerns among our group not just about substance but about process. We remain open to a continued collaborative approach, but we believe the significance of the latest changes materially alter their application and warrant further review by the Architectural Committee.

We plan to submit formal comments about these changes to the Commission this week.

Best,



Jeff Gelles  
Chair  
Rex Avenue Neighbors Association

cc: Paul Toner, Orphanides & Toner  
Lori Salganicoff, Chestnut Hill Conservancy

Rex Avenue Neighbors Association comments to Philadelphia Historical Commission for Feb. 9<sup>th</sup> meeting.

Re: 208-10 Rex Avenue – REVISED

Submitted via email to Laura DiPasquale ([Laura.Dipasquale@phila.gov](mailto:Laura.Dipasquale@phila.gov) and [preservation@phila.gov](mailto:preservation@phila.gov))

These comments are submitted on behalf of the Rex Avenue Neighbors Association (RANA), a nonprofit group founded in 2018 to address neighborhood concerns about potential development at 208-210 Rex Avenue. We appreciate the Commission's attention to public interest in development at properties that have received its protection, as the Hirst-Duhring property did in February 2021 when the Commission praised its "significance as an 'urban villa' in the garden suburb of Chestnut Hill."

During the architectural committee's meeting on Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>, the developer's attorney, Meredith Ferleger, accurately described our group as having been "working in partnership" with the How Group for the last year and half to devise a mutually acceptable development plan for 208-210 Rex. At the time of that meeting, when the committee voted to give "approval in concept" to the two new freestanding houses on the site, they were situated according to a site plan that RANA had conditionally agreed to last summer. While we hoped and planned to still work through many important details with the How Group – our architectural consultant, Matthew Millan, shared many of the committee's concerns about design elements of the new houses -- we had believed then that the houses' locations toward the back of the property was essentially settled.

Ever since the 2021 historical designation, RANA has remained mindful of the Commission's guidance that new construction at 208-210 Rex should be "pushed back on the site and away from the historic house." We urged the How Group to limit development to the back half of the property, because our goal was to preserve the preeminence on the site of the Hirst-Duhring mansion. Although some have described it as quirky, the Hirst-Duhring house is an important fixture in our neighborhood and has many beautiful and architecturally significant elements.

Something has gone awry since the Dec. 19<sup>th</sup> architectural committee's review. The site plan that the How Group submitted to L&I on Jan. 24 – at least the third revision we saw last month – moves the front house approximately 25 to 30 feet closer to Rex Avenue, well outside the rear quadrant where it had been on the December plan. The rear house's garage now faces Rex Avenue at the end of a long, straight driveway, rather than entered perpendicularly as in the prior plan. To our group, those changes seem well beyond the kind of "details" that the architectural committee delegated to staff review on Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>. A delay today would give RANA and How Group more time to discuss these significant changes in hopes of again reaching a meeting of the minds. To that end, we

ask that the Commission either withhold final approval of the project or approve the plan dated Dec. 5, 2023, reviewed on December 19<sup>th</sup>, not the newly revised plan submitted February 1. The relocation of the new houses is significant and will impose irreparable damage to the preeminence of the historically protected main house.

We wish to continue working in partnership with the How Group on this project, and have previously been pleased by their responsiveness to neighborhood concerns. We have recently suggested two possible alternatives that would help to solve design problems various parties have identified with the project, including the long driveway extending to the new houses that architectural committee chairman Dan McCoubrey thought ran too close to the porch – a problem that has also concerned our group and Matt Millan. I'd like to call the Commission's attention to one of those ideas today: eliminating the new front driveway by replacing it with one that reaches the new homes from Crefeld Street across the back of the property.

This idea would solve multiple design problems while simultaneously drawing well-merited attention to the extraordinarily beautiful, large arched window on the Crefeld Street side of the 1926 Duhring addition. Designed by one of Chestnut Hill's most notable architects as part of his own home, the Arts and Crafts addition was an important part of why the Commission decided that 208-210 Rex merited historical protection, but it is now largely obscured from public view.

While the engineers would have to accommodate a grade difference, some trees would be lost, and an additional variance might be required, the new entryway would open up public view of a face of the Hirst-Duhring house that helps make it so historically and architecturally significant. The driveway would also make it more visible to the owners of the three new homes, potentially enhancing their market value and offsetting any additional cost. And it would significantly reduce the project's impact on the Hirst-Duhring house's Rex Avenue viewshed.

We realize there may be factors that would make this idea challenging to execute. But the main point today is that we would like to continue to work in partnership with How Group to make this project better for everybody concerned. We do not wish to stand in the way of their moving this project through the RCO process, which we understand could still proceed if the PHC does not give final approval today.

We respectfully suggest that, given the magnitude of the site-plan changes since Dec. 19<sup>th</sup> and unfinished deliberations about the project's design, final approval today by the Commission would be premature. We hope it will take a different course.