

# GOTHAM

**Padriac Steinschneider**  
Gotham Design & Community Development Ltd.  
329 Broadway  
Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522  
(914) 693-5093 ■ Fax: (914) 693-5390  
Cell (914) 906-4802 ■ [arch329@gmail.com](mailto:arch329@gmail.com)

September 17, 2020

Dobbs Ferry Planning Board  
112 Main Street  
Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522

**Re: 156 Palisade Street**

Dear Members of the Planning Board:

This letter is submitted by Gotham Design & Community Development Ltd. as the planning and development firm retained by the owner of the subject property referenced above to study its potential redevelopment. This project is currently seeking Site Plan Review, which in the MDR-2 zoning district within which the property is located is an approval granted by the Planning Board.

We have prepared a revised concept plan for the development of this property influenced by the recent discussions conducted by the Planning Board considering Design Guidelines for the MDR-2 zoning district. Submitted with this letter, please find a set of 5 sheets of drawings dated September 17, 2020 for Concept F.

Following are the primary points for this concept:

1. There are two dominant types of buildings on this street. One can be understood as a house, although many that have the character of a house are actually multi-family structures. These buildings tend to have one to four residential units and have pitched roofs. The other can be understood as a small apartment building. These buildings tend to have six to eight residential units and have flat roofs. We are proposing a small apartment building, although we understand that the Design Guidelines that are being studied encourage scale components that are most common on the house model and have made an effort to integrate those scale components into the proposed design.
2. The building has six two-bedroom apartments that are approximately 1,200 to 1,290 square feet, with each apartment having either a porch, deck, or terrace providing a view to the Hudson River.
3. The front entry to the building is at the north end of the building facing the street at el.110.25. We prefer having an entry that faces the street and is a prominent feature on the front of the building. This is a common component of the small apartment buildings on this street and appropriate for a building with six residential units.
4. The proposed building has six on-site parking spaces. We understand that few of the other properties on this street have on-site parking that approaches the Code requirements, but all indications are that new buildings should have on-site parking that provides at least one parking space for each residential unit.

5. There are two ways to have on-site parking on this property. One is to have an open parking area, which is how several of the other properties on the street have provided some parking. The other way to have a parking garage. A couple of properties on this street have a garage structure as a detached accessory structure located in the rear yard. We have proposed a parking garage located in the basement of the proposed building. This consolidates the construction on the property to reduce the building coverage and conceals the cars, which we believe is desirable. There are only two other buildings on this street that handle the parking on-site with a garage at the base of the building and one of those has been eliminated as a garage, although the garage door has not been removed.
6. The Planning Board has identified a visible parking garage as an undesirable feature on this street. This proposed design locates the garage under the building in its basement set back significantly from the street so that it is not a prominent visual feature to either the public or the neighboring buildings. We contend that the way in which we have created the on-site parking makes it almost disappear.
7. The garage floor is proposed at el.105, which places it 4.5 feet lower than the elevation of 109.5 at the sidewalk at the center of the property. The driveway is at 10% grade with blend curves at the top and bottom of the slope. The elevation at the sidewalk at the start of the driveway is at el.108.25 and the driveway then drops down 3.25 feet. This is what can be safely accomplished with a driveway 55 feet long from the curb. If it is determined that the slope of the driveway can be safely increased, we are willing to do that, but we are confident that the 3.25 foot drop in the current design works.
8. The garage provides six on-site parking spaces. The building, with six two-bedroom units, requires a total of nine parking spaces. The existing use of the property is a two unit building with a requirement of three parking spaces, which are not provided on-site. The three existing curb side parking spaces with the six on-site spaces provides the nine required parking spaces. We understand that, while it has been confirmed that we are entitled to include the three existing curb side spaces in our parking calculation, there will be a PILOP fee required.
9. We understand that the Planning Board has a strong preference that the character of the parking garage not be dominant to that of the street life. We have positioned the garage door 46 feet from the front property line with the proposed porches serving three of the units located over and in front of the garage door. We contend that the garage door will not be a visual feature affecting the street character.
10. We understand that the driveway itself is not a desirable feature, but there is no way that we can find that accomplishes having on-site parking without a driveway. The Planning Board has investigated the character of driveways and noted that it can probably work on the larger lots, such as the subject property. The idea discussed by the Planning Board has been locating the driveway in the side yard and then making a 90 degree turn into the parking. The idea seems to be that, located in the side yard, the driveway will be more of a secondary component.

11. When we showed an earlier concepts with the driveway located in the side yard, there were objections from neighbors. We contend that the objection to having the driveway close to the property line is a reasonable one. The building to the south of the subject property has a very small side yard setback. Putting a driveway in the side yard for the subject property puts it immediately adjacent to the residential units in the neighboring building. Placing the driveway on the other side of the property fights against the objective of concealing the parking area by having in dropped down in elevation. The south corner of the property is at approximately el.107, whereas the north corner of the property along the street is at approximately el.112. We have proposed locating the driveway in front of the building, but integrated into a massing that is the equivalent to being located in the side yard. The front mass of the proposed building is setback 27.4 feet from the south property line. The back mass of the proposed building where the driveway attaches is set back 46 feet from the front property line.
12. To further mitigate the impact of having the proposed driveway, a retaining wall has been provided along the south edge of the driveway. This is intended to make both the driveway and the garage door less apparent from the sidewalk, the street, and the property to the south. The top of the wall is at el.113.5 where the driveway is at grade el.105.
13. The Design Guidelines in the process of being created have proposed recognizing of the public/private transition zone along the sidewalk in front of many of the buildings on this street. This proposed design provides a landscaped buffer a minimum of 10 feet deep from the front property line. An active entry area is proposed in front of the portion of the building that is closest to the front property line with a canopy over the entry and glass doors facing the street with the building lobby visually accessible from the sidewalk.
14. Contributing to this effort to activate the front of the building in its relationship with the street life are porches facing the street and taking advantage of the river views. The porches for two of the units in the building are stacked adjacent to the front entry and set back 11 feet from the front property line, which is similar to other similar porches on the street. The grade in front of the porch is at el.111 and the elevation of the lower porch is at el.115.17. The height of 4.17 feet from grade to porch is in the middle of other porches on the street, with some a foot or two above the sidewalk, but others ten feet above the sidewalk and set back further. The porches for three of the units in the building are set back significantly from the front of the building, but still an active component facing the street. These three porches help conceal the garage door. The sixth apartment has a roof terrace facing the river.
15. Concerns have been expressed by the Planning Board about the potential of buildings on larger lots in this neighborhood being able to be out of scale with their neighbors. One of the ideas that has been included in the Design Guidelines that are being developed is limiting the width of the dominant mass closest to the street. A maximum width of 40 feet has been suggested, with which we comply.

16. The proposed building has a forward most volume set back 10 feet from the front property line that is 18.25 feet wide. That volume then combines with the next volume set back 19 feet from the front property line to have a total width of 39.17 feet. The balance of the width of the building is set back 46 feet from the property line, combining for a building width of 56.5 feet. The proposed porches serving two of the apartments are positioned in the notch created by the setback between the front two volumes.
17. The parking garage projects further to the east into the rear yard beyond the proposed building above. This is necessary to provide the correct clearances and space for the six parking spaces, while also positioning the garage back from the street so that it is concealed. The top of that garage structure is at el.115.5, where the minimum grade is at el.117.5. This enables the garage to be completely buried and not visible from the buildings surrounding the rear yard. We have included the area of the garage in the calculation of site coverage, but not in the calculation of building coverage. If having a green roof over that portion of the garage makes that an issue, we can leave that part of the garage open to the sky, making it a parking lot instead of a garage.
18. To accommodate the program of creating an economically viable building on this site, we need to have a minimum of six two-bedroom residential units. We have configured the six units as three floors of two units each. The footprint that results from two apartments averaging 1,250 square feet each, with the walls, hallway, and circulation space calculates to 3,221 square feet, which is a building coverage of 37.13%. The area of the two sets of porches is 248 square feet. If that is included in the building coverage, the total is 3,469 square feet, which is a building coverage of 39.99%.
19. We understand that the Planning Board has discussed other numbers for the permitted building coverage in the MDR-2 zoning district. We contend that, with the average building coverage in the context zone for this property at 42.76% and three of the eight buildings in that context zone significantly larger than that, there is no justification for mandating a building coverage of less than 40%, particularly given the fact that the reason that the MDR-2 zoning district was created was to legalize the current character of Palisade Street and encourage future development consistent with the existing intensity of use.
20. In understanding the relative significance of the difference between 39.99% coverage and the 32.8% that the Planning Board has discussed as appropriate for an "oversized" lot, it is worth noting that this is the difference of 624 square feet. The proposed building has a setback to the rear lot line of 36 feet where 25 feet is required. In terms of nothing but the site coverage, we could expose more of the parking area and increase the rear yard set back to 51.9 feet, which would reduce the building coverage to the 32.8%. However, that would constrict the size of the units such that they would be one-bedroom units instead of two-bedroom units, which means that the project is not economically viable and does not provide the size of unit most needed in the downtown. Making that reduction would not change the height, width, or parking for the proposed building. It would simply not be as deep.

21. There has been significant conversation with the Planning Board about a concern that a building on this site could be out of scale with some of its neighbors. The ideas already analyzed above such the width of the building as it approaches the street already address the concern with massing. In the same way that we have followed the idea considered in the Design Guidelines that the footprint of the building step back from the front, we have also stepped the building back from the front with the height. The third floor cuts back 8 feet in the center massing, with a pitched roof above the porches on the front, reducing the height of that portion of the building as it faces the street.
22. The height of the proposed building is consistent with the existing height permitted in the MDR-2 zoning district. The Building Inspector has determined that, at this point in time, the height of buildings is measured from the grade plane of the existing grading on the site. The grade plane for the subject property is at el.118.32. Measuring from the grade plane to the midpoint of the pitched roof on the building calculates a height of 35.5 feet, where 40 feet is permitted. Similarly, measuring from the grade plane to the top of the flat roof on the building calculates to 28.68 feet where 30 feet is permitted. [Please see Table B-6 in Appendix B of the Dobbs Ferry Village Code].
23. There is also a provision in the Code that limits the height of eaves on buildings in certain zoning districts. While we believe that a mistake was inadvertently made when the MDR-2 zoning district was moved from the lower tier on Table B-6 to the middle tier and that this provision for the maximum height of eaves should not be applicable to buildings in the MDR-2, the calculation is measured from the side with the highest average grade on the building. The proposed pitched roof has an eave that measures 23.25 feet from the highest point of grade, where 28 feet is permitted. [Please see Table B-6 in Appendix B of the Dobbs Ferry Village Code].
24. We understand that the Planning Board is looking to make recommendations to the Board of Trustees for a change to the permitted height of buildings in the MDR-2 zoning district, but that recommendation has not yet been made. The idea of measuring from the sidewalk at the mid-point of the property may make sense as a way to restrict the height of this property and maybe a couple of others on Palisade Street, but most of the properties on Palisade Street have relatively flat topography in the building envelop as it fronts the street, which makes this change of questionable need. At this point, the only Code we can use for the height of the building is the existing.
25. We have proposed the building as a three story structure, which is permitted in the MDR-2 zoning district. Concern has been expressed that having a full height basement facing the street with three stories above it reads as a four story structure and too tall for Palisade Street. The changes made to this current plan address this with all but the left hand side of the building facing the street being clearly three stories with the floor level within six feet of the grade. The left hand side of the building is raised up a half story from the garage and down a half story from the first floor of the building to facilitate having the front entry doors at grade from the sidewalk.

26. It is our intent to have the building fully ADA compliant. Having the front door to the building at sidewalk level is part of that effort. While this results in what could be seen as a four story facade for this portion of the building, it is important to note that it complies with all of the requirements to be a three story building in both the Dobbs Ferry Village Code and the New York State Building Code.
27. Relative to the way in which the height of this building is measured both in feet and stories is the way that the grade works around the building. 156 Palisade Street is one of maybe three properties that have a significant rise in grade from the street front to the back property line in the MDR-2 zoning district between Chestnut Street and Cedar Street. This is a factor that has to be addressed in any development of this property. The existing grade on the back of the building ranges from el.119 to el.125, an average of el.122. The existing grade on the sidewalk in front of the building ranges from el.107 to el.112, an average of el.109.5. This means that from the front of the building to the back of the building there is a change in level of approximately 10 feet. Making this more significant is the fact that the existing grade favors the back elevation on the sides. We have moved the elevator and stairs in the building to the northeast corner, where we are retaining the existing grade of el.125. This facilitates having a door in the stairway the exists to grade at the second floor level. This will provide access from the building to the usable back yard, which could provide recreational space for the residents in the building and their guests.
28. Integral with the grading and the retaining wall for the garage, we have provided a sidewalk in the south side yard. This facilitates access around the building to the rear yard. We have proposed a retaining wall along the east side of the property to allow the grading in the rear yard to be more level and usable.

Our hope is that this itemized explanation for the design concepts that we are working with will help an understanding of why we believe that this works and is a good solution for the development of this property.

We look forward to presenting this project to you at your October meeting.

Sincerely,

GOTHAM DESIGN & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT LTD.  
Paddy Steinschneider, President  
As Agent for 156 Palisade Street LLC.