

Staff Report of Findings

Application for Design Review

Property Address: 29th Avenue Apartments – 717 E 29th Avenue
Applicant: Jordan Piscopo & Ross Blevins, developers; Dane Knudson, architect, Olson Projects
Hearing Date: 9/20/2023
Type of Work: New construction in the Rockwood National Register Historic District

FINDINGS OF FACT:

- 1.) The Landmarks Commission has the authority to review this proposal for a Certificate of Appropriateness under SMC 17D.100.230 “Demolition Permits for Historic Structures in the Downtown Boundary Area and National Register Historic Districts.”
- 2.) The certificate of appropriateness review process helps to ensure that new construction that takes the place of contributing resources within the Rockwood National Register Historic District is compatible with the historic character of the historic district. The review process is conducted by the Spokane Historic Landmarks Commission.
- 3.) New construction projects in National Register Historic Districts are reviewed under the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings. Staff recommendation is based on the Standards as listed below.

PROPOSED WORK:

The project is for a new apartment building to replace two contributing historic structures – 711 & 717 E 29th Avenue – within the boundary of the Rockwood National Register Historic District.

STAFF COMMENTARY/BACKGROUND:

The proposed “29th Avenue Apartment” building was submitted for review in August of 2023. Staff from the Historic Preservation Office asked the full SHLC to fill out a “Compatibility Scoresheet” for new construction that has been used in our local historic district guidance: Design Standards and Guidelines (both Browne’s Addition and the Cannon Streetcar Suburb local historic districts). Compatibility Scoresheets are used as a tool to initiate a conversation between the Commission and the applicant and are not a pass/fail exercise. A workshop noticed to public was held on Wednesday, August 30 at 3:00 pm to discuss the scoresheets and design of the new construction with the applicants. Public comment was taken at that meeting. One person spoke, and the speaker was in opposition to the project. The speaker submitted additional public comment via email, but no other written public comment had been received at the time this staff report was prepared. Any additional comments received before the scheduled hearing will be provided to the commission.

HISTORY OF THE PROPERTY/LOCATION

The site current contains two contributing historic structures, an existing triplex at 711 E 29th (1908) and a single-family house at 717 E 29th (1908).

Built in 1908, the building at 711 E 29th has likely been used for multifamily residential since original construction. In a Spokane Chronicle advertisement from November 27, 1909, there was a small two-room house being let for \$7 per month behind the main house. The house was occupied by a “pioneer merchant” Louis O. Behm in August of 1917 (when he died of meningitis at the age of 41). This property was likely built as a stacked (up-down) duplex and was most recently configured as a triplex. There are

advertisements offering the rental of the duplex units as early as the 1920s. Ads for the property in 1988 note that it was “recently restored with brick walls.”

Built in 1908, the house on the western side of the parcel appears to have been used as a single family house throughout its existence. By 1925, the property at 717 was advertised as a 7-room rental house and appears to have continued as a rental over the years.

The Rockwood National Register Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996. The nomination for the district denotes the Period of Significance as beginning in 1906 and ending in 1950 and includes approximately 350 houses. Styles present in the district include Tudor Revival, Colonial Revival and general “twentieth century residential styles.” Common materials include concrete foundations with wood, stone, stucco or shingle siding.

The author of the nomination does not describe the properties along 29th Avenue, nor did the author give them a context in relationship to the broader district. These two houses, one (711) in the American Foursquare style and the other (717) in the Colonial Revival style – are not discussed within the nomination document except to be listed as contributing to the district. They are among the earliest houses built in the district, but do not appear to be contextually related to the development of the more northern portion of the area associated with developers J P Graves, David Brown, and the Spokane Washington Improvement Company. That development did not begin until the 1910s marked by the construction of Rockwood Gateways in 1911. In 1910, these properties were across 29th from the Spokane College which spanned from Hatch to Garfield, today, there is a shopping center and the houses front on a busy arterial, 29th Avenue.

CURRENT SITE CONDITIONS:

The two properties that are being considered for demolition and new construction are located on the furthest southern boundary and near the western boundary of the Rockwood National Register Historic District. Three additional properties are located on the same blockfront as the proposed new construction, two contributing and the other non-contributing – all are single family houses of brick or wood and are single story or a story and a half. The house at 707 was built in 1908 and is a contemporary of the house at 717 (both have distinctive front gables that are unusual and were more than likely a signature of the builder). The house at 703 is a small brick bungalow built in 1930. The final ranch-style house on the corner of 29th and Scott is non-contributing due to its 1957 built date out of the period of significance for the district. The houses use traditional architectural principals with common elements of overhanging eaves and traditional materials. The setting of the properties has changed considerably from when they were first constructed and are now located on a busy arterial (29th Avenue) and face a shopping center with a grocery store, banks, restaurants, and other retail establishments. The context is no longer directly related to the greater Rockwood Historic District.

RELEVANT STANDARDS (Secretary of the Interior’s Standards):

Standard Number 9: New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property (or district). The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

SITE DESIGN STANDARDS:

1. **Compatibility** with facing blockfronts and adjacent buildings – but differentiated from the old.
 - A. The field of historic preservation has long used the concept of “context sensitive design” but uses the term “compatible.” Designing for a *specific site* within the historic district allows for compatible new construction in one spot that *may not be suitable for*

another site within the district.

- B. It is important to note that “compatibility” is not “comparability.” Compatibility can be defined in terms of the absence of conflict; in more casual and visual terms, it can mean being a good neighbor in that a building “fits in.” Comparability is a very close state of compatibility, in that the two things have enough in common that they can be compared meaningfully.
- C. The framework for context-sensitive new construction is firmly grounded in compatible contemporary design: design that is clearly of the 21st century and doesn’t try to fool the viewer into thinking that it might be historic, but at the same time, it still fits into the historic district as compatible design.

Comments:

The proposed new construction project, while larger than the adjacent houses, is proposed in a distinct location relative to other contributing properties in the district due to the fact that it is on the edge of the Rockwood Historic District, in a context much different than 95% of the other contributing properties in the district. A critical element of the sense of place of the district is the residential nature of the streetscapes. According to the district nomination, that feeling is developed and defined through planted boulevards, wide planting strips, deep setbacks, thick tree canopy, and varied irregular lot shapes. In contrast to that sense of place description, the proposed project is on an arterial with five automobile lanes and significant through traffic. Due to the arterial designation on 29th Avenue, the property has been zoned as a Center and Corridor which (under BOCA guidelines) allows for heights up to 55 feet and high density residential uses.

Based on the discussion during the workshop and staff consultation, the applicants refined the original design concept to include overhanging eaves, more appropriate siding (both horizontal and shingle style), have added windows to the façade, and added additional landscaping to the front of the building to further separate it from the street. These changes have given the structure a more residential feel when compared with the original design. This building is obviously a contemporary apartment building, but it has taken cues from the surrounding district to be a more compatible neighboring structure.

2. **Massing, Size, Scale.** Does the proposed project maintain the scale of the adjacent and facing blockfronts? Massing relates to historic patterns of dominant and secondary spaces; large forms are modulated with horizontal and vertical breaks; and how the roof form relates to the building type and occupiable space. Finally, the question of height/size asks if the project avoids a difference in height of more than two stories from its neighbors.

- A. The proposed 29th Avenue Apartments is comparable in size with other large commercial buildings in the vicinity. The commercial structure on the block next west is a large 2+ story office building. However, that building uses a setback similar to its context which helps to maintain a residential feel. *The impact of the massing and scale as experienced from 29th Avenue could be reduced by increasing the setback beyond what is currently proposed.*
- B. The proposed building’s massing does relate to the historic patterns of the context, although it is done in a contemporary manner. The use of gable roof forms, overhanging eaves and changes of modulation with exterior and recessed balconies helps to break up the massing.
- C. The proposed building is 42 feet tall and two stories taller than its closest neighbors. There is no denying that the project is much larger than the houses directly adjacent to it. However, the underlying zoning does allow this size and larger. Preservationists are challenged to balance the current housing shortage with how to respond when reviewing projects that meet the underlying development standards but may have adverse impacts to historic

districts.

- D. The opposing blockfront, which is not part of the historic district but is certainly part of the context, has long been an institutional or commercial use. Today it is the site of a grocery store and retail shopping center which it has been since the mid-century period and prior to that it served an institutional use as the site of Spokane College. There has likely never been a residential context on the opposing blockfront.
- E. During workshop discussion, some Commissioners stated that design review on the edge of the district should be treated no differently than if the project was in the middle of the district. Staff contends that the edge of the Rockwood District is notably different than the rest of the district and if staff were preparing a boundary for the district today, we would recommend the southern boundary of the district to terminate at the alleyway between 28th and 29th Avenue, even in the current condition.
- F. An empty lot one block to the east (Garfield and 29th) has similar underlying development standards to this project and is a candidate site for a large infill apartment project. This project is within the Rockwood Historic District but will not be reviewed by the SHLC because the lot is vacant and no demolition will occur. The context on this section of 29th Avenue is likely to continue to get larger in scale in the future.

Comments:

The 29th Avenue Apartments uses proportion and rhythm to establish the residential function of the building. The proposed design is visually contemporary using the “invention within” approach to new construction in the district. “Invention within” can and should be a coherent approach to design, not a jumble of various elements from building types and styles. Reinvention allows for various building forms and styles in the district to be used as inspiration and will result in buildings that would come under the broad umbrella of compatible contemporary construction.

The building does not attempt to mimic surrounding historic buildings. It employs basic architectural design principals, traditional forms like gabled roofs and typical siding profiles to complement the surrounding district.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Replacement Structure: Staff recommends that the proposed new construction is compatible with the surrounding context and should be **approved**.

HPO Report – Megan Duvall and Logan Camporeale
Design Review Committee Review: none
Landmarks Commission Review: Pending

Date: 9/15/23
Site Visit: n/a
Hearing: 9/20/23