Putting Home's Appearance Ahead of Helping Frail Couple

By Marc Fisher
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Cornelius and Merry Lucas have lived in their rowhouse in Mount Pleasant for 46 years, and they'd like to finish their run right there, if the District government deigns to permit that.

Cornelius and Merry Lucas live in the basement of their Mount Pleasant rowhouse because they can no longer manage the stairs. A D.C. preservation board denied their request to alter the front porch, which was part of a plan to install a ramp to the basement.

At 88 and 86, respectively, the Lucases can't manage the stairs anymore, so they've moved into their basement, which opens onto the back alley. Their son, Richard, determined not to put them in a nursing home, hired an architect who came up with plans to cut through the front porch and install a ramp from the sidewalk down into the basement.

But Mount Pleasant, developed in the early 1900s with rowhouses for the federal government's burgeoning workforce, was declared a historic district in 1987, and that means the Lucases need permission from the city before they can alter the front of their house.

Permission denied.

"Repeating porches of similar height and depth create a notable pattern and rhythm on these formerly suburban streets," the city's architectural historian, Tim Dennee, wrote in recommending that the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board deny the Lucases' request. The board agreed, ruling that it was more important to maintain the "rhythm" of a long line of identical porches along Walbridge Place NW than to let an aging couple stay in their own home.

"There is no exception for medical disability in the historic preservation rules," says Fay Armstrong, president of Historic Mount Pleasant, a nonprofit group devoted to maintaining what it calls "the integrity of our neighborhood."

"The porches and fronts of the houses," Armstrong says, "are what give the neighborhood its character."

No, says Richard Lucas, what gives a place character is the people who live there, people such as Cornelius, an upholsterer who served at Guadalcanal in World War II, and Merry, a nurse in the District for 40 years. Their son seeks only to let them stay in their house, get some sunlight from a new window and door, and have a second way out of their house in the event of fire.

Lucas, a retired Metro manager who lives in Greenbelt, grew up in this house and feels attached to it, but the idea that it is historic strikes him as ludicrous. Built in 1932, the Lucas place is a typical, small rowhouse with a tiny patch of green in the front and a granite retaining wall that is all of two stones high, but which the city says it must protect.

Richard Lucas wants his parents to be able to stay in their longtime rowhouse rather than having to go to a nursing home. He says the changes would increase safety and sunlight.

"The city chose bricks and mortar over the health and welfare of the residents," Lucas says. "I grew up here; I want it to look more than well-kept. I want it to be a fine property."

"The historic preservation process tends to turn into the aesthetics police," says Jack McKay, an advisory neighborhood commissioner who showed me a series of Mount Pleasant houses where preservation proponents fought against residents who wanted to let more light into dark rowhouses, or open a doorway into their basement, or replace the neighborhood's typical concrete stairs with more attractive and expensive stone steps. "A vocal minority pushes through these historic designations and then everyone suffers the consequences."

Sadly, preservation, a cause that should be all about discerning what's truly noteworthy from our past, has become a weapon in neighborhood battles over development and racial and economic change.

In Mount Pleasant, the Lucas family has seen the neighborhood change in ways both welcoming and unsettling. In 1960, when the Lucases moved to Walbridge Place, they were only the second black family on the block. After the 1968 riots and the resulting white flight, the area became mostly black. Now, under pressure from starkly rising prices, the mix of races and classes has shifted again, and the Lucases are the last black family on the block.

Merrie Lucas, 86, uses a walker to get around her District rowhouse.

Richard Lucas worries that strict enforcement of preservation rules favors the affluent -- those who can afford the expensive, elaborate solutions that preservationists suggest to modernize old houses without changing their look.

Armstrong agrees that blocks like the Lucases' "were mass-produced rowhouses for the middle class," but she believes preservation can work in neighborhoods of any economic class. "We're not trying to run people out because they're immigrants or elderly," she says. "It's about maintaining the architectural character of the neighborhood."

What Richard Lucas wants to maintain is his parents' quality of life. "I wanted to get this project going while Mom and Pop are alive," he says. "But to fight the city even more would be taking money from the project to pay legal fees. It's wrong: The city needs to be reined in. People have to see that social needs are more important than architecture."