

February 7, 2022

To: City of Philadelphia, Zoning Board of Adjustment

RE: 8330 Millman Street, Philadelphia PA

I write in support of the application of Mr. David Lockard, owner of the property and structures located at 8330 Millman Street in Chestnut Hill, requesting a variance to allow for an Auxiliary Dwelling Unit (ADU) to be constructed on the property. Specifically, I strongly support his proposal to construct this structure at the periphery of the property, attaching to an existing garden structure, rather than attaching it to the residence.

The residence, internationally known as the Vanna Venturi House, or more colloquially as “Mother’s House”, is a masterwork of twentieth century architecture. Designed by world-renowned, Pritzker Prize winning, architect Robert Venturi (who also is recipient of the Gold Medals of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the Royal Institute of British Architects), Mother’s House was designed between 1959 and 1962, and completed in 1964. The house has been shaking up the architectural establishment ever since. Discussions of the house and its continuing influence appear in widespread publications – from magazines to architectural history textbooks. The house even has been featured on a United States Postal Service stamp and recognized by the AIA with their 25-Year Award for recognition of a building of lasting influence.

Given the great historical significance and cultural value of the house any proposals to add to the site must be considered with a great degree of care and thoughtfulness. This is not a structure that should be muddled by ill-considered changes. That said, even for a structure of the significance of Mother’s House, change is necessary to continue its primary use as a house. Materials age and systems wear out and can be improved. This process of change must be managed carefully and with a clear-headed understanding of what features and elements define the significance of the building.

The owner, Mr. David Lockard, has demonstrated time and again in my view (I am often at the house to lead tours for architects and students), that he clearly understands the historical significance of the house; he is open to and seeks out expert advice about any proposed modifications, repairs, or changes. The proposed siting of the ADU developed out of a rigorous discussion about the historical values of the site and the character defining features that contribute to the significance of the main house. Simply put, the ADU’s proposed siting is ideal – it recognizes and protects the all-important approach to the house from Millman Street by tucking itself around the corner. This takes advantage of the site’s “pork-chop” shape and the existing, evergreen plantings (which were planted under the supervision of Robert Venturi).

University of Pennsylvania
Stuart Weitzman School of Design
Architectural Archives

220 South 34th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6311

www.design.upenn.edu/architectural-archives T. 215.898.8323

For almost thirty years, I have worked as a curator and architectural historian at the University of Pennsylvania's Stuart Weitzman School of Design. Among my responsibilities is the archive of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. I have contributed to publications about their work and was part of the curatorial team who organized a major retrospective of their work in 2001 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I also organize and lead tours to visit important architectural sites in the Philadelphia region, and often bring groups to Mother's House. I want to emphasize this last point because it gets to the heart of the matter. Opening up a private house like the Vanna Venturi house is a lot to ask of an owner. There are years where hundreds of visitors come to see the house – some announced, others, not. There is a clear educational value in these visits, but it also puts all who reside in the house, guests included, in view and on display. The proposed ADU provides a much-needed retreat to get away from it all. All the while, preserving, and in fact, reinforcing the elements that make Mother's House one of the most significant examples of architecture in the city (and beyond).

I am grateful to the Zoning Board of Adjustment for considering this variance proposal and for the opportunity to put forward a few thoughts in support of its approval.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'William Whitaker', with a long, horizontal, wavy line extending to the right.

William Whitaker
Curator, The Architectural Archives