

New Building in Merchantville Opens to Controversy

News Release

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First new building in Merchantville in 20 years

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The recently completed addition to Towne Pharmacy in Merchantville has surprised and apparently shocked some citizens of this small Borough. The new building which houses office space above the existing pharmacy is built in a contemporary style that contrasts with the other buildings in the small town. Complaints received by the Zoning Officer after the building was finished led him to request the Architect to return to the Planning Board to discuss the design of the previously approved project.

Project begins with local businesses

The project began on a chance discussion between the owner of Towne Pharmacy, Pharmacist George Sherman, and a customer, architect Greg La Vardera, during the spring of 1999. La Vardera and his wife, interior designer Karen Milano, were looking for an office for their growing design practice. La Vardera mentioned this and asked if Sherman would consider a second floor above the one story pharmacy. Sherman, in need of workspace in the small pharmacy, was indeed interested and a project was born.

Approvals and construction uneventful

Plans were drawn, applications made, and approvals received. Drawings and material samples presented at Board Meetings were received positively, with some remarks about the unusual appearance of the building. Presenting the project at the Planning Board meeting architect La Vardera explained that the building would strike a balance between fitting in with the scale and color of the street, but would depart from its neighbors by incorporating modern windows and an overhanging metal cornice. There was no controversy over the application and the approvals were given without any votes against. The construction proceeded uneventfully, if not slowly, finishing in early September.

Completion and controversy

The installation of the metal roof over the stairway triggered complaints by unidentified individuals to the Zoning Officer, who was also surprised by the appearance of the stair roof. Architect La Vardera said "the progressive design makes some people uncomfortable, and when the last of the roof was installed they complained. The next thing I know the Zoning officer is telling me that he does not like it and what can we do to change it?" A review of the original application confirmed that the roof was indicated and noted on the drawings, but still the Zoning Officer requested a modification. Taken aback La Vardera agreed to attend a Planning Board meeting, hoping to resolve the issue. At the meeting the Zoning Officer stated that he had received complaints. The

architect discounted this, explaining that a small number of people may not be pleased, but they will be very vocal, "Others who like the building, or who are indifferent are not going to go and tell the Zoning Officer". No written complaints were offered at the meeting, nor a list of individuals who complained. Criticism was offered by the Zoning Officer and the Mayor, but not by other board members. The Zoning officer suggested that painting the stair roof would make it stand out less. When the Architect offered that he felt the stair roof did not stand out the Mayor insisted that it did. "You are asking us to start painting a material that should not require painting for 25 years" said architect La Vardera at the meeting. Unable to gain any concession from the Architect, the Board voted to review the taped records of the original presentation to confirm the project was built as presented. One month later the Architect has received no report on this review.

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(photos follow)



Towne Pharmacy at 45 South Centre Street Merchantville
with new second floor addition.



Front of Towne Pharmacy Prior to construction.
Pictured l. to r.: Edith Silberstein, President Merchantville Historical
Society; Karen Milano, Interior Designer