

GREAT BARRINGTON HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION DESIGN GUIDELINES

I. INTRODUCTION

Great Barrington's Historic District began in response to a fear something dire might happen to the venerable Mahaiwe Theater, but it grew out of enormous respect for the solidity and elegance of downtown. The Great Barrington Selectmen appointed a Downtown Historic District Advisory Committee in October 1988 to study and possibly recommend to town meeting the creation of one or more local historic districts. At the Town Meeting in May 1989 voters approved the Great Barrington preservation by-law to preserve for future generations the historic character still remaining in Great Barrington. In addition, the creation of two districts was approved: A included Town Hall and its Civil War monument, the Fire Station and the Mahaiwe Theater and Mahaiwe Block; and B comprised Searles Castle, its carriage house and exterior wall and grounds. As time went by, the commission recommended, and voters approved, adding First Congregational Church, Mason Library and the Post Office to a District C in 1994 and Russell House (Children's Health Program) and the Train Station to District A the same year. Voters agreed to add the former First National property on Main Street to District C in 1995, and also extended District A north on Main Street to include the Park's, Sumner, City Store and City Store Annex buildings.

A. Historic District

The purpose of the historic district:

- To preserve and protect the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant to Great Barrington and to the Commonwealth.
- To maintain and improve the settings of those buildings and places.
- To assure that new construction is compatible with existing buildings in the district
- To maintain the integrity not only of individual structures but also of entire streetscapes.

Historic districts do not prevent changes from occurring, nor do they prevent new construction. The intent is to make changes and additions harmonious, and prevent the intrusion of incongruous elements that might distract from the aesthetic and historic values of the district. The purpose of any local historic district is not to halt growth, but to allow for thoughtful consideration of change.

The Great Barrington Historic District Design Guidelines are intended to explain the application of the Historic District Bylaw and to assist property owners in the Historic District as they make plans to make changes to their buildings. The Guidelines are also intended to help the Commission make consistent and informed decisions about what is and is not appropriate.

While they establish the context in which changes to buildings in Great Barrington's historic district will be reviewed, the guidelines are meant to be applied on a case-by-case basis. The important thing to remember is that property owners should consult the commission early in their planning and certainly before making any changes to their properties. In the long run, this will make the process smoother both for the applicant and the Commission.

B. Historic District Commission

The Historic District Commission reviews the following kind of changes in the Historic District: any change to the exterior of a building that is visible from a public way, public parking lot, or park. These changes include, but are not limited to windows, doors, roof lines, building materials, signs, new construction, and additions.

The Historic District Commission does not review the following types of work:

- Interior work
- Temporary signs
- Terraces, walks, driveways
- Storm doors, storm windows, screens and window air conditioners
- Color of paint and color of roof
- Ordinary repairs and maintenance

The Historic District Commission issues the following three kinds of permits:

- Certificate of Appropriateness: issued for approved alterations and new construction. Alterations may be changes in design, material, color or outward appearance of the structure including, but not limited to, doors, windows, railings, roofs, skylights and exterior staircases.
- Certificate of Non-Applicability: issued for work where a Certificate of Appropriateness is not required, that is, for changes that the Commission does not review such as ordinary repairs and maintenance, interior work or work not visible from a public way. The Commission will determine that which is visible or not visible.
- Certificate of Hardship: issued to permit work the Commission would ordinarily find inappropriate. However before this Certificate is issued, the Commission has determined that failure to approve such work would cause a substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, and that the work would not represent a significant detriment to the district, based on conditions especially affecting the building or structure, but not affecting the district generally.

Certificates of Appropriateness and Hardship require a public hearing before the Commission can make a determination. Therefore, applications must be filed three weeks before the next regular meeting of the Commission to allow time to advertise the hearing and to notify the abutters. Applications and copies of the Commission's Application Guidelines, available in the Town Clerk's office, Town Hall, give further information and documentation requirements for the application.

The Commission must determine within 14 days of the filing of an application if a public hearing is required. If so, the hearing must take place within 30 days and the Commission must make a decision within 60 days of the filing of the application.

II. GENERAL APPROACH

For more than twenty-five years the standard that has guided preservation within this country is the Secretary of Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation*. Revised in 1995 and now called the Secretary of Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, this document has proven effective in practice and forms the foundation upon which the design criteria adopted by the Great Barrington HDC stands. The introduction to these standards is attached.

In the following sections the most common alterations and changes of architectural features are described and guidance is provided which supports the purpose of the Great Barrington Historic District bylaw. Prospective applicants who adhere to these guidelines greatly enhance the likelihood of gaining approval in the form of a Certificate of Appropriateness.

The primary purpose of Great Barrington's Historic District By-law is to encourage preservation and high design standards to safeguard the Town's architectural heritage in Great Barrington's Historic District. The following guidelines have been developed to ensure that rehabilitation efforts, alterations, and new construction all respect the historic character of the districts and do not adversely affect their present architectural integrity.

The design approach to each property should begin with the premise that original or historically significant materials and/or architectural features shall be maintained and repaired whenever possible rather than replaced.

Changes and additions to the property and its environment that have taken place over the course of time are evidence of the history of the property and the neighborhood. These changes to the property may have developed significance in their own right, and this significance should be recognized and respected.

When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence of the original or later important features.

Whenever possible, new materials should match the material being replaced with respect to their physical properties, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged.

New construction, additions, alterations, and installation of modern functional items such as electrical fixtures, antennae, etc., shall not destroy or detract from historic materials and features that characterize the property. The new work should be differentiated from the old, but shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, style, materials, and architectural details of the historic property. All such work shall be undertaken in such a way that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Chemical or physical treatments that cause damage to, or entail removal of, historic materials shall not be used.

III. SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

A. Exterior Walls

1. Wood Siding: clapboards, shingles, board and batten, etc.

- Retain and repair original or later important material whenever possible. If replacement must be undertaken, replace deteriorated material with material that matches as closely as possible.
- When repainting, carry out proper preparation and use quality paint.
- Synthetic siding, such as vinyl, aluminum, artificial stone or brick is strongly discouraged because it severely compromises the appearance and integrity of old buildings. In those rare instances, when an owner wishes to use such materials, an application for a Certificate of Hardship must be filed with the Commission.

2. Masonry

- Wherever possible, original masonry and mortar should be retained and repaired when necessary. If replacement is required, deteriorated masonry should be replaced with material which matches the original as closely as possible.
- Original mortar should be duplicated in composition, color, texture, joint size, joint profile and method of application.
- When masonry is cleaned, only the gentlest methods should be used. Sandblasting and/or chemical cleaning are not permitted because of their environmental impact, and because they change the visual quality of the masonry and accelerate deterioration. Test patches should always be carried out well in advance of cleaning.

- In addition, because the application of waterproofing or water-repellant coatings can also accelerate the deterioration of masonry, it should be done only to solve a specific, small-scale problem.
- Masonry facades shall not be painted unless there is evidence that the building was painted originally.

B. Roofs

- Preserve the integrity of the original or later important roof shape.
- Retain the original roof covering whenever possible. If replacement is necessary, replace deteriorated roof covering with material that matches the old in composition, color, size, shape, texture and installation detail. If the property has a slate roof, every effort should be made to preserve and repair the existing rather than considering replacement. Slate is a near-permanent roofing material, and deterioration is generally caused by rusted roofing nails. Existing roof trim (i.e., cornice trim, fascias and rakeboards) should be maintained or replaced in kind.
- Preserve the architectural features that give the roof its distinctive character, such as cornices, gutters, iron filigree, cupolas, dormers and brackets. Downspouts should be inconspicuously located and should be painted to match the color of the siding.
- New dormers will be permitted if they are related to the forms, proportions, size and arrangement of existing windows, and constructed in matching materials and colors. If possible, new dormers should be confined to the rear of the house.
- Skylights with flat profiles may be installed on the rear of the property.

C. Windows

Windows are one of the most important architectural features on the exterior of a structure, critical in establishing the scale and rhythm of the facade. Therefore, wherever possible, the following guidelines should be observed:

- Retain original and later important door and window openings where they exist. Do not enlarge or reduce door and window openings for the purpose of fitting stock window sash or doors, or air conditioners.
- Removal of historic window sash is discouraged. If replacement is required, new sash must exactly match the existing in appearance, and no changes shall occur to the dimensions of brick openings, jambs or sashes.
- Whenever possible, repair and retain original or later important window elements such as lintels, sills, architraves, glass and other decorative elements and hardware. When replacement of materials or elements is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence.

Storm windows are excluded from the jurisdiction of the Historic District Commission.

C. Storefronts

All alterations to storefront openings, storefront infill, and fixtures shall preserve significant original and historic architectural components of the existing storefront, including those presently concealed by non-original materials. Such components shall be retained or repaired where feasible and incorporated into the design of the new storefront.

- Existing original or significant historic storefronts shall be retained or repaired if feasible or, if repair is not feasible, replaced in kind.

1. Storefront Openings.

- Storefront infill shall fit within the openings established by the original building piers and lintels.
- A storefront shall be visually separated from the upper floors or the top of the building by a horizontal architectural component, such as a cornice, masonry lintel, or sign band.

2. Storefront Infill.

- A new storefront design may be based on references to historic photographs or drawings, remnants of historic fabric, or other historic storefronts in the building or a similar type of building.

3. Display Windows.

- A storefront shall have one or more display windows.
- The proportions and configuration of the display windows and transoms within the same facade shall match.
- Display windows shall be framed with wood or metal and shall be glazed with clear glass.

4. Transoms.

- The transom frame above the entrance doors and display windows shall match the material and finish of the storefront, and the transoms shall be of a consistent size and configuration. If no historic glazing exists, the transom shall be glazed with clear glass.

5. Bulkheads.

- The storefront bulkheads shall be of a consistent height and appearance.
- If a portion of the original bulkhead exists, the new portions of the bulkhead shall match or be compatible with the original material. Appropriate new materials, depending on the facade's style and materials palette, include painted paneled wood or metal, brownstone, gray granite, and brownstone stucco or cast stone.
- Wood or metal bulkheads shall be articulated with paneling or molding.
- The following materials shall not be permitted: corrugated aluminum, shingles, simulated brick, simulated stone patterns, and clear or anodized aluminum.

E. Porches, steps, trim and other exterior architectural elements

- Retain and repair porches and steps that are original or later important features, including such items as railings, balusters, columns, posts, brackets, roofs, ornamental ironwork and other historic decorative items. If new pieces are needed, they should match as closely as possible the style, shape, scale and materials of the old.

- Fire escapes/egress stairs are very conspicuous features and, as a rule, should only be placed on the rear of the building, or where they are least visible from a public way. If installation on the street or side façade cannot be avoided, fire escapes should be designed and constructed with the same attention demanded by other major alterations and repairs, and are subject to the review and approval of the Commission.

F. Rooftop additions

The objective of preserving the integrity of the original or later important roof shape shall provide the basic criteria in judging whether a structure can be added to a roof. The overall height of the building, the prominence of the existing roof form, and the visibility of the proposed addition from a public way shall govern whether a proposed rooftop addition will be approved.

Minimizing or eliminating the visual impact of the addition is the general objective, and the following guidelines shall be followed:

- A location should be selected where the addition is not visible from a public way; setbacks should be used.
- The overall height or other dimensions will be restricted in such a way so that the new rooftop addition cannot be seen from a public way.
- The exterior treatment should relate to the materials, color and texture of the building or to other materials integral to the period and character of the building.
- Openings in a rooftop addition should relate to the building in proportion, type and size of those below, where they can be seen.

G. Signs, marquees and awnings

- Signs, marquees and awnings integral to the building ornamentation or architectural detailing shall be retained and repaired where necessary.
- New signs, marquees and awnings should be of a size, material, shape and color appropriate to the building and its current use, and should also be consistent with other signs and buildings along the street.
- Signs, marquees and awnings applied to the face of a building should be attached in such a way that they can be removed at a later date without damaging the material to which they are fastened.

1. Awnings: Awnings can be an enhancement to a commercial storefront if designed in manner consistent with the style of the architecture. Historically, awnings were constructed of fabric, bracketed from the wall of the structure with a shed profile, and frequently retractable. All of those attributes would be considered appropriate in a contemporary design. Domed awnings are discouraged, as are awnings made of metal or any coated fabrics with a glossy sheen. The size and placement of the awning should be carefully considered so as to not obscure important architectural features or overwhelm the scale of the structure.

2. Signs: All signs added to a building should be part of a single signage system, or reflect a design concept appropriate to the specific features of the original architecture. The commission will consider: the appearance of a proposed sign on the building and on nearby buildings; the effect of the sign on decorative and other architectural details; and ancillary structures (e.g., supporting brackets) required for installation.

- In general, signs must be constructed of appropriate material, kept small and simple in their design and not internally illuminated. Wall mounted or post mounted signs will be considered if appropriately sited and/or placed with regard to the building's exterior. Aggressive colors and/or

logos detract from the historic character of the district and are, therefore, generally regarded as inappropriate.

- External lighting should be concealed from view if possible and carefully controlled to illuminate only the surface of the sign with minimal brightness and glare.

H. Modern Equipment

Modern equipment such as satellite dishes, antennae, mechanical equipment, etc. are inherently inconsistent with the historic character of the district and therefore should be screened or located so as not to be visible from the public way. While window air conditioning units are not within the Commission's jurisdiction, permanently installed ground, wall or rooftop mechanical equipment are and therefore, should be located where not visible from the public way. Planting, fences or rooftop enclosures are all appropriate screening devices that could be used when it is not possible to find such a location.

I. Landscape Features

The general intent of this section is to preserve the existing or later essential landscape features that enhance the property.

It is recognized that often the environment surrounding the property has a character, scale and street pattern quite different from that existing when the building was constructed. Thus, changes must frequently be made to accommodate the new condition, and the landscape treatment can be seen as a transition feature between the structure and its newer surroundings.

- The existing configuration of the site should not be altered unless shown to be necessary for maintenance of the structure or site. Additions to the site configuration will only be considered if they will not obscure the exterior of the structure.
- The original layout and materials of the walks, steps and paved areas should be maintained if significant grade changes constitute an important feature of the structure or site. Consideration will be given to alterations if it can be shown that improved site circulation is necessary and that the alterations will accomplish this without altering the integrity of the structure.

J. Removal of Later Additions and Alterations

Each property will be separately studied to determine if later additions and alterations can, or should be removed. It is not possible to provide a single general guideline.

Factors that will be considered include:

- compatibility with the original property's integrity in scale, materials and character
- historic association with the property
- age and quality in the design and execution of the addition.

K. New Construction

The density of development within the Historic District does not allow much opportunity for new construction, but where feasible it must be considered with particular sensitivity to the character of the surrounding area. Clearly the three most critical factors to consider are the location, scale and massing of the proposed project. The scale and location will be dictated in part by the Town of Great Barrington's Zoning Bylaw which should be referenced carefully before proceeding with design. Specifically, the front yard setback of neighboring structures should be maintained to preserve the "street wall" that is already in existence. Setting a structure back too far can be as destructive to the streetscape as one set too close.

It is not the intent of these guidelines to limit new construction to copies of earlier buildings. New designs may also evoke, without copying, the architecture of the property to which they are being added, through careful attention to height, bulk, materials, window size, and type and location, and detail. A building should not, however, be altered to an appearance that predates its construction.

New construction should reflect the era of its birth, as the older structures do theirs, while maintaining sensitivity to the scale, proportioning, and materials of these historic structures. Indeed, false reproductions of architectural styles not common to our era or location diminish the value of authentic examples within the districts.

New additions should not disrupt the essential form and integrity of the property and should be compatible in size, scale, material and character of the property and its environment. Where possible, new additions should be confined to the rear of the building.

New additions or alterations should be done in a way that, if they were to be removed in the future, the basic form and integrity of the historic property would remain intact.

When approaching the addition to an existing structure within the district, the size of the addition relative to the original is a significant factor in determining the appropriate design. An addition notably smaller than the original structure should be designed, in most cases, to continue the existing use of materials, trim, windows, roofing etc. The addition in this instance should be set back from the front plane of the original, either to the side or to the rear if possible. In no case should this addition be taller than the original and typically should be lower in height, leaving the original massing of the structure apparent. While it would be appropriate to simplify the architectural details found in the original, its proportioning and character should be maintained in the addition's design.

Larger additions, especially those that are significantly larger than the original structure require greater creativity in their design. It would be most appropriate to setback a large addition from the main facade to preserve the massing of the original building. The materials and architectural expression of the addition should not overwhelm or diminish the original by reproducing it, and the massing of large additions should be articulated into forms of compatible scale and size to the original. As much as possible, the bulk of the addition should be screened from public view by utilizing landscaping and setbacks to the rear of the property. The materials, architectural detailing, proportioning and scale of openings should harmonize with but not necessarily match the original, establishing a clear delineation between "old" and "new" portions of the structure.

There will be occasions when additions are planned for existing structures, which are themselves incongruous with the district because of the presence of an inappropriate style or material. In this case the Commission would encourage the prospective applicant to consider alteration of the original structure to make it more compatible with the district while adding to its size. The presence of an incompatible structure should not be construed as a license to increase its incompatibility, but rather as an opportunity to improve it.

L. Demolition

Demolition of any structure or portion thereof within the historic districts requires the approval of the Historic District Commission, except when ordered by the Building Inspector or other safety officer for reasons of public health and safety. Demolition is generally discouraged unless the structure is so deteriorated that rehabilitation is not practical or the structure is of no historic value to the district. In the former instance the Commission may require that a new structure replicating the original be built in the place of the demolished structure if its value is significant to the district.

In general, renovation and/or replacement in kind is preferred to the demolition of all or a portion of a historic structure. Likewise, decorative architectural elements on the structure such as trim, brackets, bays and

porch columns should not be removed without Commission approval. Preference will be given to replacement in kind.

If a historic structure's location interferes with the owner's plans for the property, relocation to an appropriate site will be considered and is preferred to demolition.

M. Paint

Paint and stain colors are not within the jurisdiction of Great Barrington's Historic District Commission. Paint however, may be specified by the Commission as a surface treatment to a feature or structure which would be otherwise inappropriate without a finish.

IV. AMENDMENTS TO THE GUIDELINES

The Commission reserves the right to amend these guidelines at any time and from time to time as they deem appropriate, by a majority vote of a legally constituted quorum of the Commission.

V. SEVERABILITY

If any section of the guidelines is deemed to be invalid, illegal, or unconstitutional, that section shall be severed from the text, and the remaining sections of these guidelines shall continue to be in full force and effect.