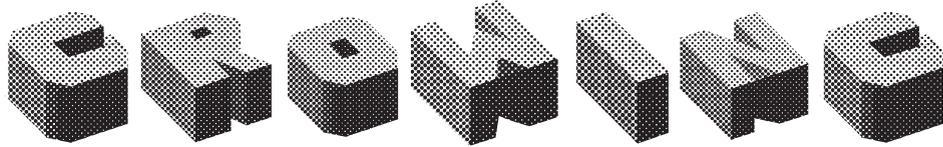
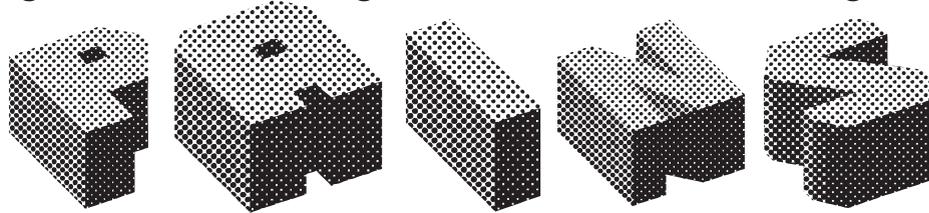


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Growing Pains: Controlling Additions in Historic Neighborhoods



By Melissa Baldock, Metro Nashville Historic Zoning Commission

The Metro Nashville Historic Zoning Commission (MHZC), like many of its counterparts across the United States, often struggles with the issue of large additions proposed for modestly scaled historic houses. MHZC and its staff must balance the need to keep Nashville's historic houses and districts economically viable and desirable with our mandate to protect their scale and character.

Over the years, MHZC has developed different ways of allowing property owners to increase the size of their historic buildings without greatly impacting the house's massing as perceived from the street. In most cases, approved additions have been successful in retaining the historic character of the house. However, problems arise when property owners or developers propose additions that combine several of the approved means of expansion, and the resulting addition negatively impacts both the historic house and its surrounding historic context.

In many ways, the pressure for large additions to historic houses is a product of the success of Nashville's historic neighborhoods. Our historic neighborhoods are becoming more and more desirable for families and young professionals, many of whom are moving to more urban districts from the suburbs or from other cities and towns. As property values have risen in several historic districts, both homeowners and real estate developers have purchased smaller historic houses with the desire to substantially increase the square footage of the houses.

Nashville uses both historic zoning overlays and neighborhood conservation zoning overlays to protect our historic neighborhoods. In historic zoning overlays, MHZC regulates all changes to the exterior of a historic property and its site. This includes alterations to fenestration, cladding materials, exterior repairs, roofing, and fencing, as well as any demolition and new construction. In neighborhood conservation zoning overlays, MHZC only gets involved when there is demolition or new construction, including infill and additions, proposed. Nashville's first historic zoning overlay was created in 1978, and our first neighborhood conservation zoning overlay was created in 1985. Of our twenty-one districts, six are historic zoning overlays, and fifteen are neighborhood conservation zoning overlays. With the exception of two commercial overlays in downtown Nashville, our districts are comprised primarily of detached single-family residences dating from the turn-of-the-20th century to the 1930s.

Each historic and conservation district in Nashville has its own set of design guidelines that helps

MHZC staff and commissioners determine the appropriateness of changes and additions. Because many of our districts have similar periods of development, building forms, and architectural styles, the guidelines for the districts are typically similar. Our design guidelines are written to allow flexibility, and for additions, they include the following general principles:

- Additions should be situated in rear so to avoid disturbing the front or sides of the house.
- Additions should be inset from the sidewalls of the historic building or be differentiated with a change in materials.
- Additions should not destroy significant architectural or historic features of the house and should be compatible in size, scale, height, material, and character of the property, neighborhood, and environment.

Over the years, MHZC has developed policies to interpret these broad guidelines. These policies aim to allow for the expansion of a house without affecting its original form as seen from the street.

Additions Wider than the House:

MHZC typically asks that rear additions be inset from the sidewalls of the historic house, at least for a length of several feet, in order to differentiate between the historic house and the addition. We commonly allow additions to step back out to match the line of the historic house after an inset. In some instances, we have permitted additions to extend beyond the sidewalls of the historic house after an initial inset. However, an addition can only be wider than the historic house if the historic house is unusually narrow (typically less than thirty feet in width) or if the house is shifted to one side of the lot.

Side Additions: Side additions are only considered if the lot is greater than sixty feet in width or is wider than the neighboring context's typical lot. When permitted, side additions should be set back from the front wall of the house, and ideally should be located within the back half of the side façade. They should be narrower than one-half the width of the historic building and should be at least two feet shorter than the historic house. We typically ask that the addition's roof form be hipped or side gabled in order to minimize its perceived height.

In 2011, MHZC approved a modestly scaled side addition to a 1920s house on Ferguson Avenue in

the Belmont-Hillsboro Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay. In this case, the house's seventy-foot-wide lot is ten to twenty feet wider than the typical lots on this block. The architect situated the side addition towards the back of the house's side façade, ensuring that the original form of the historic house can still be easily read. The use of a stucco panel finish helps to distinguish the addition from the historic house, and the addition's hipped roof and subordinate height ensure that the historic house remains prominent.



MHZC approved a side addition on this Ferguson Avenue project because the house is situated on an unusually wide lot, the addition is located towards the rear of the house, it is differentiated from the historic house with a change in material, and it does not detract from the historic form of the house as seen from the street.

Dormers: Rear dormers, including shed dormers, are commonly approved, as long as they are inset two feet from the sidewalls of the house. Most rear dormers are not easily seen from the street. Therefore, in general, they have been a successful way to permit the expansion of historic houses without significantly affecting the historic character and form of the house.

MHZC recently decided to permit side dormers in our conservation overlays, although not in our historic zoning overlays. The hope is that allowing side dormers might reduce the pressure for large rear additions. New side dormers should be appropriately scaled to the house and set at least two feet below the ridge of the roof, two feet from a side wall or roof valley, and two feet from wall of the house below.

In at least two recent projects, permitting side dormers has opened up attic spaces for bedrooms and

has therefore reduced the proposed footprints of additions. On a c. 1910 transitional Victorian house in our Eastwood Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay, a new side dormer was successfully added. The side dormer, in conjunction with a new rear dormer above a new fourteen-foot-deep addition, enabled the owners to create a new bedroom and bathroom in the previously underused attic space. Another side dormer was approved for a similar house in our Lockeland Springs-East End Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay. By meeting emergency egress requirements, this dormer allows the attic space to be used as a new bedroom. Despite these two success stories, MHZC has not found overall that allowing side dormers has resulted in a marked reduction in requests for large rear additions.

Ridge Raises: Similar to side dormers, ridge raises have been approved as a way to allow property owners to expand and utilize previously unoccupied upper-level space and thereby minimize the need for an expanded footprint. Ridge raises are only permitted on side-gabled houses, without clipped gables. They should be inset a minimum of two feet from each side wall of the house in order for the original ridge line to be evident, and can only rise a maximum of two vertical feet. A modest ridge raise might be one constructed in conjunction with a rear dormer and either no expansion of the house's footprint or with a small-scaled, one-story addition. An example is in our Eastwood Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay, which successfully incorporates a ridge raise with a rear dormer, allowing the

conversion of the attic space into livable space without encroaching on the rear yard

Additions Taller than the House:

In general, MHZC encourages additions that are lower in height than the historic house. Nashville is a hilly city, and many historic houses sit on sites with substantial slopes. For many properties, this condition enables a two-story addition to be constructed behind a one or one-and-a-half story house and still be lower in height.

While most of the approved additions are lower in height or match the height of the historic house, MHZC does permit rear additions that are up to four feet taller than the historic house. These additions must tie into the historic house at a point matching or lower than the ridge line of the house. To minimize the visibility from the street, the taller portion of the addition should be at least forty feet behind the front wall of the house, and the addition should have a hipped or clipped gable roof.

MHZC has found that allowing new side additions, wider additions, side dormers, ridge raises, and taller additions can be appropriate when an applicant proposes these items individually, or even in pairs. However, we are seeing more and more applications that assemble several, if not all, of these means of expansion and combine these features with large rear additions that take up the majority of the rear yard. These large projects have proven to be the most challenging and the most controversial.

The project on Oakland Avenue in our Belmont-Hillsboro conservation overlay best exemplifies the issue of additions pushing the envelope of appropriate scale by using nearly every available means of expansion. The Oakland Avenue house was constructed c. 1915 as a one-story bungalow. The addition, approved by MHZC in early 2011, is both wider and taller than the historic house, and has a ridge raise. Moreover, the addition more than doubles the house's footprint and extends the house to within ten feet of the rear property line. MHZC approved the project, based on staff recommendations, because every aspect of the project had been approved in the past in Belmont-Hillsboro district, and, individually, the means of expansion met the design guidelines. From the street, the massing, height, and scale of the Oakland Avenue addition cannot be fully discerned. However, looking back, MHZC realizes that large



This ridge raise on Greenwood Avenue was combined with a rear dormer to create occupiable space in the attic. A rear-yard addition was not necessary since space was gained by expanding the attic.

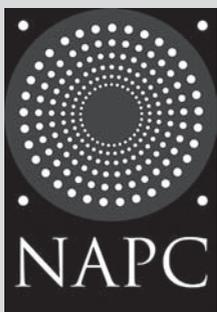


While the large size of the addition on Oakland Avenue may not be perceived by the average person from the street, it does impact the neighboring properties and the historic context as a whole. The addition extends almost to the rear property line and is deeper, wider, and taller than the historic house.

additions like this one, whether or not they are easily visible from the street, can negatively alter the scale of not only the historic house but the surrounding historic context as well. MHZC is tasked with protecting the historic character of neighborhoods overall, and issues like how one property owner's views or privacy will be affected by a neighbor's addition is outside of our purview. However, there does come a point at which the strain of large additions on neighboring property owners begins to affect the larger district as a whole.

The challenge becomes identifying the tipping point at which an addition becomes too large and inappropriate. MHZC has debated developing a policy establishing a threshold for how much an addition can increase the footprint of a historic house. However, assigning a percentage, such as an addition can only be 75% of the footprint of the house or can at most double the footprint of the house, has proven to be difficult. The varying sizes of houses and their lots, as well as the varying neighborhood context, even within districts, have made assigning a figure an ineffective way to address the issue. When looking at new proposals for additions, we have started to pay closer attention to lot coverage and how the amount of open space on a lot will be affected if an addition is built. We then compare the percentage of open space remaining after the addition is constructed with the neighborhood context to help determine whether or not an addition is appropriately scaled. It has not solved all of our issues, but it has enabled us to better understand the effects of large additions on the historic context.

Like many commissions across the country, MHZC is often criticized simultaneously by developers for being too restrictive and by neighboring property owners for allowing additions that are too large. While we would like to believe the old adage about how a great compromise leaves everyone angry, that implies our work is finished. MHZC must continue to investigate ways to protect our historic neighborhoods while allowing them to grow and change. In the end, we remind ourselves that Nashville's historic neighborhoods are popular places to live, and that's a great thing for the future of historic preservation in our city.



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