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Regulating New Construction in Historic Districts: Contemporary Design

by Eleanor Gorski

Few building projects evoke more opinions, public meetings, and discussion than new construction projects in historic districts. As preservation goals have become more mainstream and as the number of local historic districts has grown, so has the number of new construction projects proposed and reviewed by local communities and preservation commissions. Every request for new construction in a historic district is site specific, and what was successful in one location can be a disaster in another. The challenge for preservation commissions is knowing how to make the judgments that will preserve the distinguishing characteristics of the district while allowing expressions of change and adaptation.

Most preservation standards and guidelines dictate that new construction in a historic district should be of the highest quality possible and respond appropriately to its context. These can be fairly subjective goals. Each can be accomplished through the design review process as established by the preservation commission. However, community sentiment and a preference for a particular architectural style can complicate or even negate agreed upon standards and guidelines.

Anytime new construction is proposed for a historic district, questions begin to arise concerning what is “good” and “appropriate” design. Some critics say that the review process itself inhibits creativity or forward thinking design in a project. Assuming that design review is simply a “check” to ensure that new construction reflects the basic character-defining features of a district, then this should not be the case. This check can work both ways—by not dictating or restricting styles, both “good” and “bad” designs may be built, depending on your viewpoint. A contemporary design and a traditional design may both be built in the same district, since both meet the same basic guidelines.

But how can good contemporary design regardless of style be encouraged? Contemporary design (design of its place and time) may meet historic guidelines, but is this what everyone wants? To answer these questions, the *Secretary of the Interior's*

Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings offers some guidance for new construction in historic districts. Most preservation commissions throughout the county use these standards to some degree, and they are seen as the basis for design review in many historic districts.

Standard 9 states: “New additions, exterior alterations or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features and spatial relationships that characterize the property. New work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.”

This Standard notes three important review considerations for new infill construction: characteristics of the property, differentiation of new work from old, and compatibility with existing fabric in terms of materials, features, size, scale, and proportions and massing. But there is no mention of design or style, which leads to open interpretation for any design that meets the broad criteria listed above.

The effectiveness of the Standards in guiding “good” new construction is frequently debated, for their language is open to much interpretation. In this sense, it is important to note that the Standards are to be one of many guides to assist local commissions in design review and are meant to be interpreted based upon the locality and the particulars of each project. Only Standard 9 is devoted to what has become one of the most challenging demands on local commissions and review boards.

The design of new construction in response to these review considerations depends on the following variables: the skill of the architect, the skill and architectural knowledge of the commission staff and commission members, zoning and code requirements, local politics, and the involvement and temperament of the community. Almost none of these variables can be controlled—but they may be shaped for the best possible outcome, depending on the circumstances and the historic district.

The proposed new construction does not have to replicate the existing style of the surrounding architecture, but it should be compatible. The proposed project should be evaluated for its compatibility with the surrounding historic district based on a number of criteria, and how such criteria are applied depends on the type of project and its location. The criteria should include: (1) site placement; (2) height, massing, proportion, and scale; (3) materials; (4) development patterns; and (5) architectural characteristics, such as ornamentation and fenestration.

Furthermore, Standard 9 states that a new design should be “differentiated from the old.” This is sometimes taken to an extreme, when applicants propose a contemporary design that would distinctly stand apart from the existing buildings in the district, drawing attention to itself instead of working as part of the ensemble of buildings. In a district with a long period of significance and many different building styles, it is easier to make an argument for such a distinctive contemporary design. In a district with more consistent building styles and with very little new construction, this becomes more difficult. The degree to which such a building would stand out and not be compatible can be measured somewhat but is also subjective.

Still, designs reflecting current styles and tastes should use siting, massing, proportion, and materials to achieve compatibility with the surrounding district, and it should be communicated clearly with the public what is required to make a contemporary design also a compatible one. As with any design, it is important not to “water down” the concept so that it turns into a mediocre ghost of the initial proposal. The goal should be to allow the applicant’s vision to come through so that he or she is satisfied with the process while aligning the design with the guidelines and standards.

Personal biases are hard to get away from in any situation, and this is certainly true in the often perceived-to-be subjective exercise of design review. Commission members may shun contemporary or other styles, or too heartily embrace them. The best way to avoid these biases, whether at a staff, commission or community level, is to have a varied group of reviewers with different expertise and interests comment on a project. Most commission ordinances require that the membership include a mix of professions for this very purpose, and this mix may help provide objectivity in the decision-making process. And community groups by their very nature often have a variety of differing viewpoints. The commission staff managing a challenging project should also confer with the other staff or commission members on critical decision points or precedent issues, to confirm that his or her recommendations are in line with the standards and guidelines.

But what happens when an entire commission has a bias against contemporary styles of design? Education is the key in this circumstance. Workshops to discuss the standards and guidelines should be held regularly to help commissioners understand how to evaluate contemporary design. Good examples of new construction produced in different cities and districts can show what is possible and acceptable. And there are different types of contemporary design, just as there are variations in styles from any era. It may simply be a reaction to the unfamiliar, rather than a real bias. Design training also helps commission staff to be more knowledgeable when working with applicants who are willing to move beyond traditional and replicative design. Applicants, in turn, will know that their designs will be given a fair review. It is hard to encourage good contemporary design if the commission is uncomfortable with it. ■

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