

Report of the Subcommittee on Guidelines.

Guidelines

The key to the administration of any community's historic districts are the guidelines for maintenance and new construction followed by that community's appointed review body and provided to owners of local historic properties. Those guidelines, developed after much thought and input by members of the community, are the basis for local review of projects affecting buildings and neighborhoods designated as Old and Historic Districts. A project that is difficult to categorize within local guidelines and their application by the review body generates much of the discussion, concern, misunderstanding and controversy surrounding Historic Preservation.

The U.S. Secretary of the Interior, keeper of the records of the nationally recognized historic treasures, has developed and updated Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties about how to best preserve those treasures and respect the environment in which they are located. In addition, those Standards are followed by the National Park Service and State historic preservation offices to review the appropriateness of work undertaken in pursuit of Federal and state Historic Tax Credits for rehabilitation of historic properties. The majority of local governments across the country have used the Secretary of the Interior's standards as the basis for the administration of local historic districts. The Task Force has researched historic design guidelines across the country and found that local guidelines almost always follow the spirit and letter of the Secretary's Standards, although they may have been edited for clarity. Experience apparently has shown that consistency is to everyone's benefit.

It should be noted that local guidelines are just that; guidelines. Their intent is to offer advice to property owners and those who administer Historic Districts, and to provide consistency in decisions about what is appropriate and what is not. They are not rules, commandments or mandates. They are guidelines that are applied on a case by case basis. As each guideline is written the language offers clues about how important each guideline is by such words as "should", "must", "may", "encouraged", or "discouraged". In addition, all these guidelines are subject to interpretation by property owners, review bodies, neighbors and the community. As a result all guidelines should be written as clearly as practical.

According to the experience of the Task Force members and the citizens who have expressed their opinions to the Task Force, the guidelines that generate the most concern are those that speak to new construction, additions to existing buildings and the use of salvaged materials. To address the issue of salvaged materials first, the Task Force wants to be clear that using salvaged materials is a beneficial practice that both preserves and reuses historic materials. The problem lies with using materials, or salvaged elements, that are not true to the building in question. To maintain the integrity of a historic structure salvaged ornamental features, such as wrought iron fences, dormers, brackets, cornices, windows and doors that evidence a specific style and period should only be used if they can be documented as matching features that were once part of the property. Salvaged elements that have no particular style, such as masonry, siding, decking, or simply-configured windows, doors or fencing could be reusable on most renovation projects.

The recommended character of new construction and additions is a bit more difficult to discuss. The stated purpose for creating Historic Districts is to “provide a means by which City Council may recognize and protect the historic, architectural, cultural and artistic heritage of the City of Richmond.” To some people this protection means that new construction must look like what is already there, much like Colonial Williamsburg, while others feel that historic districts are more organic, that time should not be frozen and that new construction must both respect the history, and demonstrate that the city’s architectural heritage has continued to evolve. To show that time did not stop, that the area is growing and changing.

The Task Force feels that there may be circumstances that warrant and support, but do not require, new construction that absolutely mimics an old building, such as replacing a building or a portion of a building destroyed by fire, or replacing a demolished building whose appearance can be clearly documented. The Task Force believes that new construction must honor and respect the architecture of an historic district, but that the style of new construction should not be dictated. The Task Force also believes that this new construction should be able to be identified as not original to the area or neighborhood so a visitor could tell what was old and what was new. As one member stated the point, “if you could drive down the street at 60 mph all the architecture would blend seamlessly, but if you walked the street you could tell what was original and what was new.”

The Task Force, therefore offers the following suggestions:

In the introduction to the sections of the guidelines dealing with new construction (CAR Handbook Page 42), add the following paragraph; New construction should be compatible with the historic features that characterize its setting and context. To protect the significance of the historic context, the new work should reference the historic materials, features, size, scale, proportions and massing of its setting. However, new construction should be clearly discernible from the old to protect the authenticity of the historic district. Making new work discernible may or may not be achieved stylistically. “Compatibility does not mean exactly duplicating the existing buildings or environment. Perhaps the best way to think about a compatible new building (or addition) is that it should be a good neighbor, enhancing the character of the district and respecting the context, rather than an exact clone.” The existing language under **Form #2** (CAR Handbook page 42) would be deleted.

To address the use of salvaged materials the Task Force suggests replacing the language that exists on CAR Handbook page 49, item 10 with the following; Adding features or salvaged architectural elements that suggest an inaccurate or undocumented sequence of construction should not be undertaken because this confuses our understanding of the evolution of Richmond’s historic built environment.

In addition to the above the Task Force recommends that an expanded list of definitions and a glossary of terms be developed in addition to the definitions found on pages 40 and 41 of the Handbook.

Finally there are some smaller “house keeping” recommendations we would propose as well:

Siting # 4 (CAR Handbook page 42) Delete

Siting #2 (CAR Handbook page 42) Add ”front and side yard” before the words setback patterns

Height, Width, Proportions & Massing #2 (CAR Handbook page 43) Delete___

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