

Town of Reading

West Street Historic District Commission



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Design Guidelines

for

West Street Local Historic District

DRAFT – November 2005

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Almost all construction work on the outside of a property located in the Historic District, including fences, requires review by the West Street Historic District Commission and in many cases a building permit from the Building Inspector. Always check with the Commission and the Building Inspector before having such exterior work performed.

Introduction

Reading is a rare community in its architecture and history. Few towns have so many homes whose styles and construction methods span three centuries, and a heritage that includes settlement in the mid-1600s and a colonial militia that fought during the Battle of Lexington and Concord.

The Town's West Street Historic District reflects that rich heritage. It was the site of the first settlement in today's Reading and the site for the mustering of the militia on April 19, 1775. The District is a showcase of modest and diverse houses built from the mid-1700s to the Victorian Period to the post-World War II suburban boom. Numerous homes have been honored by being placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This architectural diversity reflects how West Street, like Reading itself, grew from a 17th century farming village to a mature 21st century suburb.

Background

The Historic Districts Act, Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40C, was created to protect and preserve the historic resources of the Commonwealth through a local review system that encourages and ensures compatible improvement and development. In general, local historic districts have three key purposes:

1. To preserve and protect the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant to the history of the Commonwealth and its cities and towns;
2. To maintain and improve the settings of those buildings and places; and
3. To assure that new construction is compatible with existing buildings and their historic relationship to other buildings in their vicinity.

Under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40C and Town of Reading Bylaws, Section 5.18, the West Street Historic District Commission is required to review the architectural appropriateness of most proposed exterior design changes, whether they be a minor alteration, new additions, or removal of trim or structures. Property owners in the Historic District are required to obtain a certificate from the Commission prior to starting any exterior work on buildings or structures. Please note that, by Town Bylaw, the Building Inspector cannot issue a building permit for exterior work or demolition without the necessary certificate from the Commission. Anyone contemplating exterior work should contact the Commission and property owners are encouraged to present preliminary plans at a regularly scheduled Commission meeting to better understand Commission requirements.

Purpose of Guidelines

These Guidelines are intended to help the Commission and homeowners in the West Street Historic District make sure that physical alterations and new construction are done in a manner that respects this heritage and are compatible with the historic architecture and streetscape. They are also intended to help the Commission make consistent and informed decisions about what is and what is not appropriate.

The Guidelines are not meant to prevent change or freeze houses as they are. They are to guide exterior changes as houses are inevitably adapted to contemporary needs and requirements. They are meant to balance individual creativity in design with a continuity in the District's physical and cultural character, with the goal of enhancing the quality of the built environment for all residents.

General Guidelines

In the District, the West Street Historic District Commission shall determine whether the proposed construction, alteration or demolition of an exterior architectural feature, as seen from a public way, will be appropriate to preserve the character and appearance of the District. Commission members may refer to the available house-by-house description when reviewing applications to better understand architectural and historic significance.

The Commission also serves as a resource. It can recommend publications and provide information about appropriate design and use of materials.

In the District, each building or structure shall be recognized as a physical and cultural record of its time, place and use. The historic *character* of a building or structure shall be retained and preserved even if the materials are not retained in all cases. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features that characterize a building or structure shall be avoided as determined by the Commission.

The purpose of reviewing a proposal is to make sure any change honors the history and cohesiveness in the architectural style of individual houses and reflects the best qualities of the home's period. For this reason, these guidelines cannot be a prescriptive design manual of simple "do's" and "don'ts." Reasonable judgment is involved, from both the applicants and the Commission.

It is not the intent of the Commission to dictate style or taste by the review process. Rather, it will review the compatibility of a proposal with existing architecture, the site, streetscape, and the community. It will review land coverage, massing (bulk), proportions, design, detail and materials.

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.

The review process will only be extended to the form and detail that are perceptible from a public way. But it is the Commission's authority to determine whether a property and certain features are visible from a public way, and to proceed with the review when appropriate.

Deteriorated historic features should be repaired rather than replaced. All architectural changes shall be appropriate to the original style of the building or structure (if sufficient evidence exists for it), or to its altered style (if it has been significantly altered to reflect characteristics of a later style).

Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature should match the old in design, color, texture, and the other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features should be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.

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.

Demolition of part or all of a structure is considered to be an alteration to the exterior and is subject to determination of review by the Commission.

When applying for approval to demolish a building, it is necessary for the Commission to approve the proposed footprint of the replacement building. The importance of the old building to the streetscape, as well as its historical significance, will be considered by the Commission.

The District's Characteristics

Characteristics which are encouraged and which contribute to the uniqueness of the District include:

- Modest designs that are residential in scale and with such elements as porches, dormers, etc.
- Emphasis on craftsmanship for overall design as well as detail
- Use of natural materials
- Compact but not oversized ratio of building mass (bulk) to land
- Variety of vernacular architectural styles with an emphasis on simplicity of design

General Principles for Design Used in a Review

Character – Is the proposal appropriate to the existing community character which is illustrated by the variety of architectural styles?

Harmony – Does the proposal have a consistency and unity of form and detail which is separate from style and building type?

Site Context – How successful is the relationship between a proposal and its surroundings relative to setbacks, heights, and the harmony and character of streetscape?

Spatial Relationship – Does the proposal address the issue of varying sizes of front, side and rear spaces in relation to site and adjacent properties?

Specific Principles for Design

Scale – Does the proposal demonstrate a balance relationship in the parts of the design and a domestic scale consistent with other structures in the district?

Height – Does it have relationship of height to that of adjacent properties which tend to be consistent within streetscapes of areas of the overall community?

Massing/Bulk – Is there an overall relationship of the building size and scale relative to the lot and to surrounding properties?

Setback – Does the relationship to site and to streetscape maintain balance and harmony within the streetscape?

Roof – Are the shapes and angles consistent with surrounding roof shapes and pitches to maintain balance and setbacks and visual lines?

Fenestration – Do the patterns and rhythms of windows and doors maintain a balance, which can be symmetrical or asymmetrical and convey a sense of function?

Materials – Is the exterior cladding, roof, window, door, and architectural trim compatible with materials used in the district?

Surface Treatments – Is there an overall harmony of texture and detail?

Examples of Items Subject to Review

The following list of examples of the *most frequent items* as seen from a public way that are subject to review should be considered to be a guideline only.

It is not intended to be all-inclusive.

- Exterior HVAC equipment (excluding window air conditioners)
- Exterior lighting fixtures
- Garden houses/storage sheds
- Non-vegetative landscaping (fencing, walls, drive/pathways)
- Outside stairs (except as required by Law)
- Roofing
- Roof Decks
- Siding
- Skylights
- Street furniture
- Swimming pools
- Temporary garages
- Trellises
- Windows

Exemptions From Review

- Chimney caps
- Paint color
- Flagpoles, sculpture mailboxes (freestanding or attached), window boxes, house numbers
- Gutters and downspouts
- Interior items such as features, colors, or materials
- Mechanical and plumbing vents
- Ordinary maintenance and Repair of any exterior architectural feature of buildings and structures within the historic district. (“Ordinary maintenance and repair” does not include replacement, or changes of materials, design, or size of the existing feature.)
- Outdoor furniture
- Plant materials/trees
- Play sets
- Solar Panels
- Storm windows and doors
- Satellite antennae or similar mechanical equipment
- Temporary signs or structures for celebrations, charitable drives or other purposes
- Terraces, walks, sidewalks or similar structures, provided that any such structure is substantially at grade level.

Further Advice

Fencing

Natural fencing is encouraged where possible. Wire fencing may be installed inside hedges to make them less child, pet, and ball permeable. Fences of wood, stone, brick or iron are encouraged; vinyl or other synthetic fences are not an appropriate material in the district. Fences across the front of a property are discouraged, especially across the front of a house. Stone walls should be left intact.

Roofing

Whenever possible retain original roof covering or replace deteriorated roof covering with material that matches the old in composition, color, size, shape, texture and installation detail.

Shutters

Shutter size is an important component; generally they are to be one-half the size of the window so that they can close and cover the height of the window or appear to do so.

Siding

The use of aluminum, vinyl or other synthetic siding is generally discouraged.

Masonry

Wherever possible, original masonry and mortar should be retained. Original mortar should be duplicated in composition, texture, joint size, joint profile and method of application. Deteriorated masonry should be repaired and replaced with material which matches as closely as possible the original.

Windows and Doors

The opening dimensions of original and later doors and windows are best preserved, as are original or later important window elements such as sash, lintels, sill, architrave, glass, shutters and other decorative elements and hardware.