

Historic Review Commission INFORMATION SHEET

CITY HISTORIC DESIGNATION AND HISTORIC REVIEW

The purpose of City Historic Designation is to preserve the historical, architectural and visual characteristics of structures, sites, objects, and neighborhoods that are not protected by the zoning ordinance, and which make those places distinctive. Historic designation is an honor recognizing the importance of a particular place to Pittsburgh's heritage. For this reason, the Historic Review Commission (HRC) has been established to protect the existence and appearance of designated structures, sites, objects, and districts. The Historic Review Commission is composed of seven members appointed by the Mayor of Pittsburgh. Its goal is to ensure that the changes that come inevitably with time will not destroy the historic character of individual buildings and their neighborhoods. Once a structure, site, object, or district is designated, its appearance comes under the jurisdiction of the Historic Review Commission, which must review and approve all exterior work that is visible from the public street or way.

There is an established regulatory process for the HRC's review of visible exterior alterations, including demolitions, new construction and additions to buildings that have been designated. The regulatory process sometimes removes some of the discretion that property owners now exercise over the appearance their buildings. In exchange, the City acts to maintain the character of entire neighborhoods and to establish a certain basic standard for renovations, so that no individual owner can degrade an entire area through thoughtless remodeling, and so that places important to Pittsburgh's past will be preserved intact for future generations. Such regulation may sometimes be controversial, but it is not illegal or unconstitutional; courts have consistently upheld the right of the municipality to designate and regulate historic landmarks and districts.

The HRC's jurisdiction does not include use of property, interiors of buildings, or parts of buildings that cannot be seen from a public street or way. Furthermore, property owners are not required to make any changes to their buildings upon historic designation. All elements and features on a building at the time of the historic nomination can be maintained in perpetuity. The HRC's authority extends only to reviewing proposals initiated by an owner.

REVIEW PROCESS

Once a building or district has been designated as historic by the City Council, property owners who wish to make exterior repairs and alterations must submit an application along with their plans to the Historic Review Commission for review and approval. An application for the review process can be submitted in person at the Department of City Planning offices, by mail, or by FAX. The Commission's staff is always ready to meet with property owners and discuss their plans, from as early a stage as possible, so that the goals of the owner and of the City may both be met.

STAFF APPROVAL

The Commission has authorized its staff to issue immediate administrative approvals for a broad range of work applications, such as repairing or replacing building elements to match existing elements. The HRC staff also has the authority to review and approve applications that call for restoring a building to its original appearance, or applications that use standard maintenance or renovation elements that the Commission has approved in advance. Among the standard renovation techniques and elements that the staff can approve are the cleaning of brick and stone, the use of artificial sidings and aluminum or vinyl windows on the sides and rear of buildings (when they are not visible or are minimally visible from a street or way), and the installation of storm windows and appropriate styles of doors. In addition, the HRC staff can approve the replacement of existing standard slate roofs with asphalt shingles. Other elements that can sometimes be approved by staff are awnings, shutters, burglar bars, railings, garage doors, fences, and signs.

HISTORIC REVIEW COMMISSION APPROVAL

The Commission itself reviews applications for demolitions, new construction, major alterations, and/or changes in materials.

HISTORIC REVIEW COMMISSION MONTHLY MEETINGS

If the HRC staff can make an administrative approval, it will do so immediately. Otherwise, the staff will schedule the property owner for the next Commission meeting, which is usually held on the first Wednesday of each month in the first floor Hearing Room at 200 Ross Street, downtown Pittsburgh. The hearings are generally informal. After listening to presentations from the HRC staff and the property owner, the Commission members discuss the application with the owner and usually vote on the matter immediately. If the application is approved, the HRC staff prepares a "Certificate of Appropriateness," which serves as the Commission's permit. If the application is turned down, the Commission will indicate what changes will be needed to obtain its approval. Appeals can be made to the Court of Common Pleas.

GUIDELINES

The Historic Review Commission reviews all proposals on their own merits, but bases its judgment on a set of guidelines drawn from the Federal Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, modified by the Commission to reflect suggestions solicited from each historically-designated neighborhood. These modifications are made in attempt to suit the guidelines to the unique character of the specific historic district, since each area has its own architectural character and functional requirements.

The goal of the guidelines is to retain the distinctive and historical character of the district without placing unreasonable financial burdens and time delays on building owners and residents. The guidelines ask that original elements be retained and repaired, if possible, or replaced to match the appearance of the original elements. If original elements are missing, new ones that are visually compatible with style of the building can be appropriate. The Commission takes into account the cost of repairs and replacements, and weighs them against its charge to preserve the historic character of the building and the neighborhood.

LOCAL REVIEW COMMITTEES

The Historic Review Commission may establish a Local Review Committee (LRC) of representative property owners in a historic district to assist in formulating the guidelines and to advise the Commission on work applications in that district. This process provides community participation in the historic review process and keeps the Commission informed about local concerns. Local Review Committees have been established in four of the City's historic districts: East Carson Street, the Mexican War Streets, Manchester, and Penn-Liberty.

APPROPRIATENESS

One of the basic principles of historic review is the determination of whether a proposed change is *appropriate* for a particular building or not. Strictly speaking, the Historic Review Commission does not attempt to impose a standard of “good taste” in its reviews, since such a standard would be quite subjective. Instead, the Commission relies on its own experience and the expertise of its staff to understand whether or not a particular building element or kind of work proposed for a building would preserve the historic architectural character of that building. The Commission can do so because most architectural styles in the past employed a limited range of materials, designs, elements, and ornaments that can be determined by research.

The Commission determines the appropriateness of work proposals on a case-by-case basis. Certain kinds of elements might be appropriate for a building of one style, location, and use, but inappropriate for another.

NEW CONSTRUCTION

In reviewing new construction, the Commission’s goal is to make sure that the new building fits in with its surroundings. The Commission reviews new construction proposals against more than a dozen criteria, among them materials, colors, height, setback, proportions of the windows, rhythm of the openings and projections, etc. The Commission does not require the use of any particular style of architecture, but has approved both neo-Victorian and contemporary designs in the past. The Commission will only approve a design, however, if the design has achieved a certain threshold of compatibility with its neighbors. The qualities that make a building compatible, while based on the criteria noted above, will change from neighborhood to neighborhood and even from street to street, depending on the particular character established by the existing buildings there.

DEMOLITIONS

The Historic Review Commission will review all applications to demolish buildings in City Designated Historic Districts. When it does so, the Commission will consider the historic and/or architectural significance of the building in question; its value in the streetscape; its structural condition; the costs of renovating it; and the character and quality of any proposed replacement building.

EXAMPLES OF GUIDELINES

The rule of thumb that the Historic Review Commission utilizes in its review of exterior work applications is this: the street facades of a building should be kept as close as possible to the original design and materials (usually brick or wood siding, wood windows, paneled wood doors, etc.), while the non-street sides and rear might be modified with compatible replacement siding and windows and new additions. Some particular guidelines that the Historic Review Commission uses are as follows:

Paint Color: The ordinance allows the Commission to review paint colors, but it generally does so only to prevent the use of odd or extreme color combinations. The review can be initiated by a phone call to the Commission’s staff. No special “Historic” colors are prescribed. The only hard-and-fast rule about painting is that the HRC does not approve the painting of previously unpainted brick and stone.

Siding: The Commission regularly approves the use of aluminum or vinyl siding on the sides and rears of houses.

Windows: The Commission requires replacement windows to match the old ones, especially in size and type, but regularly approves the use of aluminum or vinyl windows on the sides and rear of houses.

Storm Windows: The Commission’s staff is authorized to approve the installation of storm windows that fit the window openings in shape, size, and color.

Roofs: The Commission's staff is authorized to approve the use of asphalt shingles in most cases. However, the Commission must review the replacement of barrel tile or patterned slate.

Porches: The Commission urges the retention of all original porches. It will work with owners to determine an appropriate degree of restoration or replacement.

Window Air Conditioners: The Commission does not regulate window air conditioners that do not destroy the windows themselves.

Plantings: The Commission does not usually regulate plantings; its jurisdiction is limited to built elements of the landscape, as well as its general form (terraces, etc.).

Awnings: The Commission regularly approves the installation of traditional canvas or canvas-like awnings.

Repairs: The Commission's staff is authorized to approve all repairs (and replacements) that match the appearance of the existing elements, including gutters, downspouts, brick repointing, roofing, etc.

ENFORCEMENT

Since the City's historic preservation ordinance is incorporated into the building code, failure to comply with the review process or with the decisions of the Commission is a violation of the building code. Enforcement of the code (and thus the ordinance) is in the hands of the inspectors in the City's Bureau of Building Inspection. In extreme cases, violations can be prosecuted in court. However, there have been very few cases in the past when the Commission has found itself at loggerheads with a property owner. Instead, the Historic Review Commission attempts as much as possible to accommodate the needs and limitations of the individual property owners, and to arrive at a mutually acceptable decision in a spirit of cooperation.

If you have any questions concerning this material, please feel free to call the Historic Preservation Office at the Department of City Planning, at 412-255-2243.