1 General Information for Applicants

This brochure, published by the Lower Merion Township Historical Architectural Review Board (HARB), contains information about architectural review in Lower Merion’s commercial and residential historic districts. Please review the information before planning a new construction, renovation, or repair project for your property. Familiarity with the HARB’s standards will help move a project quickly through the approval process thus saving time and money.

What is a historic district and what are its benefits?

In 1980, the Township of Lower Merion enacted a historic preservation ordinance to preserve the unique character of our community. The ordinance created local historic districts, areas whose distinctive character conveys a visual sense of Lower Merion Township’s architectural and cultural heritage. In addition to preserving our community’s unique architectural heritage, rehabilitation and reuse of buildings in historic districts have positive effects on the local and regional economy.

What is the HARB?

The HARB is a public advisory body created by state and local laws. The nine-member body helps to protect the historic character of Lower Merion Township by considering the effects of proposed changes to buildings within historic districts and on the Township’s Historical and Architectural Inventory, and by commenting on the appropriateness of those changes. The HARB makes recommendations to the Building and Planning Committee of the Township Board of Commissioners. The Township Board of Commissioners makes the final decision on all HARB applications.

What are the benefits of a historic district?

- neighborhood stability and retention of property values
- revitalization of older commercial areas and attraction of new consumers
- sales of building materials for preservation, repairs, and renovations
- creation of jobs from the handy man to the design professional
- enhanced community image and respect for local history.

In 1962, the township designated Harriton House (1704) and the remaining sixteen acres of Robert Ellis’ land grant farmstead as a historic district to protect and preserve this important site for the public benefit.

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What does the HARB review?

Any exterior changes, including additions, new construction, alterations, renovations, major repairs, material replacement, the erection of signs and awnings and the relocation or demolition of historic buildings or sites within the Township’s historic districts require HARB review and approval by the Township Board of Commissioners. HARB approval comes in the form of recommendation for a Certificate of Appropriateness (C of A).

HARB’s architectural review is guided by principles contained in the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. These are common-sense guidelines for appropriate and sensitive rehabilitation that encourage the following:

- **Identify, retain, and preserve** the form and detailing of architectural materials and features important to your building.

- **Protect and maintain** important architectural features. This usually involves the least degree of intervention and often prevents the need for further, and often more expensive, work.

- **Repair rather than replace** deteriorated physical features where possible. If repair is not possible, then the HARB encourages property owners to replace the features in-kind.

- **Replace rather than reconstruct.** If it is necessary to replace a deteriorated feature, and in-kind materials or techniques are unavailable, then use compatible new materials and techniques that match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities. Reconstruction of missing features is only appropriate if based upon physical or documentary evidence, such as photographs or drawings.

HARB review focuses on maintaining the scale and character of individual historic properties and assessing how alterations affect the entire historic district.

A summary of the types of projects that the HARB reviews and the general principles they apply follow.

**Additions and new construction**

Projects involving additions to historic buildings or new construction can dramatically change the appearance of a historic district and its surrounding landscape. As a result, they are subject to a comprehensive review.

The HARB encourages:

- appropriate design for new buildings within a historic district;

- new construction that is harmonious with the old in scale, proportion, materials, height, color and setback;

- a basic size and shape that coordinates with historic buildings in the surrounding area;

- different, but compatible detailing, wall planes, roof lines, cornice heights, materials, siding or window types.
Alterations and renovations
Alterations and renovations to buildings in historic districts also have the potential to alter the district’s historic character. The Standards for Rehabilitation offer specific guidance for these changes.

The HARB encourages:

- an attempt to identify, retain and preserve the form and detailing of architectural materials and features important to a building;
- minimal alterations to the building’s historic design;
- new design elements and scale that are compatible with the historic;
- the use of compatible materials and techniques (in renovation work).

Repairs and replacement
When needed, repairs and the in-kind replacement of historic materials and elements are encouraged by the HARB. These activities help maintain historic buildings and can prevent the need for more intrusive work later.

The HARB recommends:

- non-intrusive repairs that respect your building’s important materials and architectural elements;
- replacement (only after repairs have been deemed impossible) using original materials and techniques to the extent possible;
- the use of compatible materials and techniques (when in-kind replacement is impossible) that are similar in design, color, texture and visual quality to the historic element.

Learning More
If you are interested in knowing more about Lower Merion’s history or the architectural style of your building, the following books will be helpful. Contact your local or regional library.

Lower Merion history


Architectural Styles


Signs and awnings

Because of the continuing growth and development of Lower Merion Township’s historic commercial district(s), the HARb reviews numerous sign applications. The HARb considers the following elements when evaluating new or replacement signs in historic districts:

- position on the building
- size
- shape
- materials
- typeface and logo
- illumination

For signs and awnings, the HARb encourages:

- simply-designed signs that are compatible with the size, scale and character of the buildings on which they are to be attached and with surrounding buildings; and
- signs that do not hide, cover or remove important historic architectural elements.

Demolition in historic districts

The HARb discourages demolition within historic districts because it alters the character of the streetscape, surrounding buildings and the demolition site. All attempts to preserve the historic building should take place before considering demolition, since once destroyed, the structure can never be replaced. Demolition of buildings and structures in historic districts should be a final alternative only when all other options have been exhausted.

The HARb does not recommend demolition unless:

- demolition involves a modern addition on a non-significant portion of the building, provided that the demolition will not adversely affect those parts of a building that are significant;
- demolition involves a non-significant accessory structure, provided that the demolition will not adversely affect those parts of a building that are significant.

Maintenance is preservation

An on-going maintenance program for your building can enhance its value. By investing smaller amounts of money on a regular basis—to identify and correct potential problems—large and more expensive repairs can be avoided or certainly forestalled. The HARb encourages property owners to prolong the life of original materials on historic structures through regular maintenance and to avoid replacement with newer materials.
Adaptive use
The HARB encourages the adaptive use of historic buildings and structures as a way to preserve the character of Lower Merion Township’s historic districts. Some options for adaptive use include:

- re-using or continuing the use of second-story space in commercial buildings;
- re-using of historic storefronts;
- converting residential buildings for institutional or commercial use when permitted in the zoning code;
- converting industrial or commercial buildings for housing.

Benefits of adaptive use include:

- retention of historic district character;
- potential cost-savings over new construction;
- use of tax credits in certain circumstances (see below);
- retention of high quality historic craftsmanship and materials;
- presence of existing infrastructure, including sewers, roads and water service.

Investment tax credit for rehabilitation
Federal tax incentives for rehabilitation have been available for several years for income producing properties. This incentive is administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior through the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The rehabilitation investment tax credits effectively reduce the costs of rehabilitation to the owner (and certain long-term lease-holders).

To qualify for the 20% federal investment tax credit:

- your building must be listed or be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places either individually or as a contributing building within one of Lower Merion’s historic districts;
- the project must meet a “substantial rehabilitation test” and be finished within two years;
- after rehabilitation, the building must be used for an income-producing purpose for at least 5 years;
- the rehabilitation work must be completed according to the Secretary of Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation.

If you need more information about whether your building is eligible to use the investment tax credit for rehabilitation, contact the Department of Building Regulations at the Township Building, 75 East Lancaster Avenue, Ardmore, PA 19003, (610) 645-6200.

A basic reading list about maintenance and preservation
Check for these books in your local library or bookstore.


Commonly Asked Questions

Q: What is the difference between an addition, alteration, repair, or replacement-in-kind?

A: For purposes of these guidelines, addition is defined as new construction to the exterior of a building. Alteration involves returning a building to a useful state, while saving those building parts which represent its historical, architectural or cultural significance. Repair is maintaining a building as it exists today by making it weather resistant and structurally safe. Replacement-in-kind reproduces, by new construction, the exact portion or detail of part or all of a lost building, to its original appearance.

Q: How do I make sure that my project will get HARB approval?

A: Begin by reviewing the HARB design guideline brochures most appropriate to the project. For example, if you plan to make alterations to a commercial storefront in the Ardmore Commercial Historic District, review a copy of the “Alterations and Renovations” brochure from the Department of Building Regulations. Smaller projects, such as repairing a front door or replacing it with a new door of the same kind may be able to be approved at the Department of Building Regulations without going through the full Certificate of Appropriateness process. The “Repair and Replacement” brochure provides guidance on the materials you will need to bring to the Department of Building Regulations to have their personnel make this determination. While these brochures do not replace consultation with qualified architects, contractors and the HARB, they can help to guide the work and to make the historic architectural review process easier.

Q: When should I hire an outside professional?

A: The HARB Certificate of Appropriateness process does not require that you hire an outside professional to gain approval for your project. However, outside professionals can be helpful if your project is more than a simple repair, repainting what has already been painted on the exterior or replacement of specific building elements with exact replacements. Architects, contractors and other specialized professionals in the building trades may be able to expedite the approval process if you have serious time constraints on your project.

Q: I am planning a complex project and want to know HARB’s concerns before I get too far along in the design process. What can I do?

A: The HARB encourages any applicant, with a project large or small, to consult with them early in the design process—ideally before an architect or contractor is hired. The HARB is available on an informal basis to provide feedback on projects. The HARB encourages this kind of dialogue before substantial sums are paid for plans and specifications.

Q: Is the architectural review process expensive and time consuming?

A: No. The key to a successful experience is preparation. Before spending money on architects or contractors, review this application package and the appropriate design guideline brochures for the project. If a building or sign professional is involved, be sure they have experience working in historic districts, and ideally with the HARB. It is important that they also review the guidelines and submission checklists included in this application package before beginning any design work.

Be sure to submit ALL requested materials to the Department of Building Regulations at least eight (8) calendar days prior to the next scheduled HARB meeting. The HARB is eager to work with applicants to develop a project plan that is compatible with the character of Lower Merion’s historic districts and that will fit the owner’s needs and budget. There is no fee for the application or any of the consultations or preliminary reviews of the project.

Who Can Help Me?

If you are considering a commercial building project, a new sign or putting in new windows, contact the HARB for review of your project in its earliest stages.

If you would like to discuss your project informally, the HARB has reserved 15 to 20 minutes at the end of every monthly meeting to provide advice and consultation to any member of the public. This informational meeting with the HARB will allow you to review your project and get feedback on potential concerns before you finalize your plans.

Contact the Department of Building Regulations at (610) 645-6200 for the date of the next HARB meeting and to schedule your consultation. The HARB is here to help.
Glossary of terms

Houses in Lower Merion span from the Georgian to Post Modern styles, with a great concentration of handsome vernacular and architect-designed homes from the late 19th Century to World War II. The following drawings represent composite buildings, and provide a basic vocabulary of terms used to describe specific building elements.

- Brick chimney with molded brick chimney cap
- Gable roof with cedar shingles
- Six-light dormer windows with pedimented gable above
- Wood cornice
- Smooth faced splayed stone lintel
- Eight-over-eight light double-hung wood sash window
- Muntin
- Random coursed rubble stone masonry wall
- Stone sill
- Pent roof
- Nine-over-nine light double-hung wood sash window
- Four-light wood sash
- Three-panel shutter
- Six-panel wood door with four-light transom
- Shed roof addition

- Brick chimney
- Standing seam metal roof
- Dentil
- Wood cornice
- Fascia
- Pedimented window head
- Two-panel shutter
- Six-over-six light wooden sash window

- Muntin
- Wood sill
- Wood clapboard
- Entablature
- Capital
- Single-light wood transom
- Wood door surround
- Side-light
- Four-panel door
- Riser
- Tread
- Basement window with security grille
- Downspout

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