

## 2 GUIDELINES FOR NEW CONSTRUCTION AND ADDITIONS

This brochure contains design guidelines for new construction and additions to buildings in the historic districts in the Township of Lower Merion. These guidelines, published by the Lower Merion Historic Architectural Review Board (HARB), build upon the Township Zoning Code. The brochure will help you understand new construction and addition design issues, but does not replace consultation with qualified architects, contractors and the HARB.

Please review these guidelines before planning new construction or an addition to your property. Familiarity with the HARB standards will help move a project quickly through the approval process, thus saving time and money.

### Why does the HARB regulate new construction?

New construction can dramatically change the appearance of a historic district and its surrounding landscape. The HARB seeks to preserve the character of the entire historic district through review of new construction or additions to all buildings historic and otherwise in historic districts.

### Is new construction or an addition really necessary?

Before starting a project, the HARB encourages you to ask the following questions:

- Is new construction in a historic district necessary to achieve your goals?
- Could a nearby vacant historic building suit your needs?
- Would re-configuration of existing interior spaces be a more appropriate alternative than new construction?

### Why is contemporary design important?

Making a new building look old by mimicking historic features diminishes the real historic buildings in a historic district.

#### *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;
- use of different, but compatible detailing, wall planes, roof lines, cornice heights, materials, siding or window types; and
- coordination with the basic size and shape of other historic buildings in the surrounding area.

#### *The HARB discourages:*

- inappropriate new construction, not in the character of the surrounding neighborhood.



*An addition to the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church retains the scale, character, roof shape and window pattern of the historic church complex.*

## Addition and new construction guidelines

The HARB reviews eleven elements when making decisions about whether a new building or addition is compatible to a historic district. These elements are addressed in order of importance:

### Surroundings

- First, define your project's "area of influence" — the surrounding buildings and landscape that will directly relate to the new construction.
- A new building should fit in with other buildings on the block by acknowledging their basic design components—scale, proportion, materials, height, color and setback.

### Massing, height and form

To achieve appropriate massing, height, and form in a historic district, new construction should:

- respect and acknowledge the basic shapes and sizes of surrounding buildings;
- be no higher than the tallest building located in the area and be in proportion to surrounding buildings;
- express the prevailing scale, proportion, and form seen in surrounding buildings.

### Setback and orientation

The HARB may support owners in their applications for special exceptions to the Zoning Code if they try to maintain a historic setback in a historic district. To achieve this:

- respect established lot configurations and the relationship of buildings to lot lines;
- note the prevailing orientation and setback of buildings from roads and streets in the area and use that setback in the new building.

### Proportion

Proportion is the ratio that relates the dimensions of a building's elements (height, width, window and door size, roof pitch, etc.) to the building as a whole and to other buildings. Sensitive new design should:

- share similar proportions to neighboring buildings or others in the district.

### Patterns and rhythm

Patterns are the arrangement of windows and doors in a regular and repetitive manner across the front of a building. A person passing a building experiences this pattern as a rhythm. To incorporate these elements in compatible new construction:

- determine the pattern of design elements in neighboring buildings and incorporate a similar rhythmic pattern in the new construction.



*Although obviously modern, this addition to the Gladwyne Public Library uses similar stone and roof line to retain the character of the historic library building.*

### Roof type

Buildings in a historic district often share a dominant roof shape or pitch. You can strengthen the relationship of your new building to surrounding historic buildings by:

- making the ridge line on an addition lower than that on the historic building;
- keeping new roofs similar to old ones in pitch, in shingle or slate color and in type (gabled roof, hipped roof, etc.). The same theory holds for roof types on additions to existing buildings.

### Surface materials

The choice of surface materials on additions and new construction is important because of its high visibility.

#### *The HARB encourages:*

- use of the most common building materials in a historic district;
- traditional materials, such as brick, stone, wood and stucco (if prevalent in the district) in new construction projects;
- attention to the quality of installation of the building materials, including the trim work at corners, doors and windows.

#### *The HARB discourages:*

- selecting artificial materials that imitate historic materials, such as wood grained aluminum or vinyl siding.

## Porches and other building projections

- Assess the presence or absence of building projections such as porches, awnings and overhangs on historic buildings in the district and use of a similar type.

## Architectural details

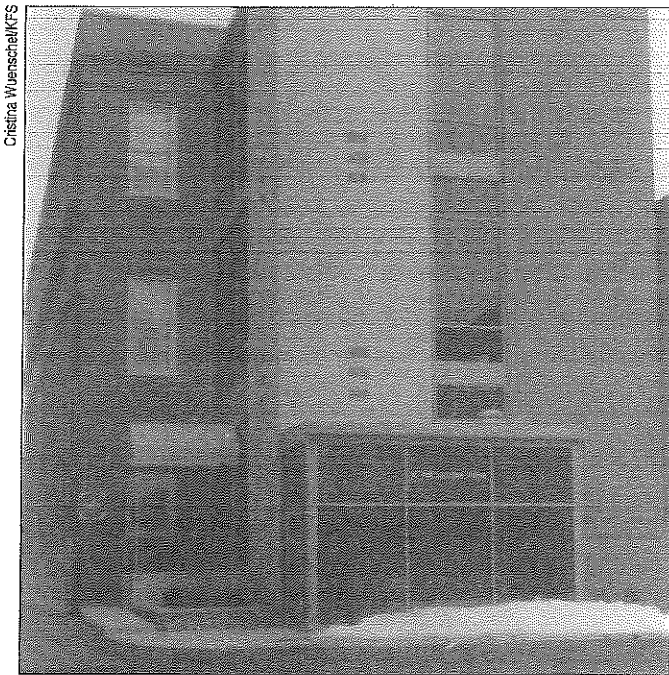
Windows, muntins and shutters, bracket work, ornamentation and porch columns define a building or district's historic character.

### *The HARB encourages:*

- repetition of historic architectural details in new construction to help preserve a district's character;
- use of architectural detail suggestive of the detail found on surrounding buildings in the district.

### *The HARB discourages:*

- using a profusion of architectural detail on a new building when the district is comprised of simple buildings with minimal ornamentation.



*This elevator addition to a historic building in Ardmore is a successful example of using different, but compatible wall materials for the elevator enclosure.*

## Color

Exterior surface finishes provide color to buildings depending on the materials used.

- Stucco, stone or wood, as well as paint or stain that cover a material's natural color can add visual interest to new construction.
- Determine which use of color—natural or applied—dominates in your area of influence.

- Respect historic color traditions when selecting materials or colors for your new construction.

## Landscape issues

Landscape elements should be subordinate design features in a historic district.

- Walls, fences, walkways and drives are traditional elements.
- New landscape elements should conform to historic precedents for screening yards, parking areas or other private spaces.

### *The HARB encourages:*

- use of traditional construction materials where possible, such as brick, stone, appropriate wood treatments and paving materials;
- situating parking lots behind or beside buildings and screening them with plantings, fencing or walls.

## Special considerations for additions to historic buildings

The HARB considers the following issues when evaluating additions to historic buildings:

### **Placement of additions on historic buildings**

Because they are directly attached to historic buildings, additions can be especially disruptive to the visual character of a historic district.

- Construct your new addition on a secondary or rear exterior wall to help preserve the building's historic form.
- Set the addition back from the front wall plane so that the outer edges of the historic building form are still visible.
- For rooftop additions, set the new work back from the roof edge so that the proportions and profile of the original building are not radically altered.

### **Saving significant materials and features**

- Design additions to historic buildings so that significant elements of the historic building, such as window and door openings and surrounds, porch details, decorative shingles and roof lines are not hidden, damaged or destroyed.

### **Additions to non-historic buildings in historic districts**

The HARB uses these criteria in evaluating additions to modern or heavily-altered historic buildings in a historic district:

- Additions to these buildings will generally be approved if their scale and character are appropriate.
- Additions should not visually detract from nearby historic buildings.

## When is reconstruction appropriate?

Reconstruction is defined as reproducing, by new construction, the exact form and detail of a vanished building, or part of it, to its original appearance at a certain time period.

- Reconstruction is most appropriate in cases where a natural disaster or fire has destroyed a historic building.

The HARB discourages reconstruction of lost buildings unless they are:

- clearly documented which may include photographs, architectural drawings and surviving physical evidence.
- built with materials, detailing and decorative features to match or closely approximate the original building.

## Who Can Help Me?

If you are considering making an addition or have purchased a vacant lot in a historic district, contact the HARB to review 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 spend money on architects, contractors or plans.

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

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