3 GUIDELINES FOR ALTERATIONS AND RENOVATIONS

This brochure contains design guidelines for alteration and renovation projects in the commercial and residential historic districts of Lower Merion Township. The guidelines, published by the Lower Merion Historical Architectural Review Board (HARB), build upon the Township Zoning Code. The brochure will help you understand alteration and renovation design issues, but does not replace consultation with qualified architects, contractors and the HARB.

Please review these guidelines before planning an alteration or renovation project for your property. Familiarity with HARB standards will help move a project quickly through the approval process thus saving time and money.

What is the difference between repair and alteration/renovation projects?

The basic difference between repair and alteration/renovation work is simple: Repairs do not alter a building's historic design. Renovation and alteration projects often do modify the design of a historic building.

For example, a project to repair the deteriorated sections of a historic dormer in a roof does not alter the fundamental building design even if it involves the use of a substantial amount of new wood clapboard. But converting a window into a door opening is considered a renovation/alteration project. Such a change does alter a building's original design and destroys historic fabric.

While renovations can be done in a sensitive manner, the HARB encourages owners to attempt repair and selective replacement work before undertaking substantial alterations or renovations.

What is important to know about alterations and renovations in historic districts?

The HARB encourages minor repair and maintenance work for historic building elements that have not been previously altered because maintenance is good preservation. If renovations are absolutely necessary to make a building suitable for your use or to reverse prior alterations, the HARB encourages you to perform the work in a sensitive manner, using the following general guidelines:

The HARB recommends:

- using similar building scale and design elements that are compatible to the original building;
- making alterations only to the extent necessary;
- using compatible materials and techniques that are similar in design, color, texture, materials, workmanship and visual quality to existing historic elements or details on the building, and taking care to incorporate these details into the alteration.
Guidelines for altering and renovating specific building elements

The following guidelines deal with altering and renovating some specific building elements, including storefronts, upper stories and cornices on commercial buildings, and porches, dormers and door and window openings on residential buildings. The guidelines clarify the HARB's standards for common alteration and renovation projects in Lower Merion Township's historic districts.

Commercial buildings
Alterations or renovations are sometimes necessary to adapt historic commercial buildings for modern use. The elements most commonly altered on commercial buildings include the storefront, upper stories and cornice.

Historic storefronts
Storefronts are often the most character-defining feature of historic commercial buildings. The HARB encourages the preservation of historic storefronts. If your storefront has been previously altered or renovations are absolutely necessary, consider the following guidelines.

The HARB recommends:

- restoring the facade to its original appearance if possible;
- noting your storefront's proportions, construction materials and architectural details before beginning a renovation project;
- determining which elements enhance the storefront's basic design and which conceal it;
- using old photographs to ascertain the former appearance of your building's storefront. These images can help you determine what may lie behind box signage or artificial siding that covers original detail.
- determining how much of the existing storefront can be restored or repaired, and how much alteration or renovation work is necessary.

Upper stories
Even though upper stories constitute the majority of most commercial buildings, they often receive little attention because so much emphasis is placed on the storefront. How these upper floors are treated is crucial to presenting an image of a vital downtown. Consider the following guidelines when making alterations to the upper stories of a historic commercial building.

The HARB recommends:

- using window treatments that give the impression that upper stories are occupied;
- if storm windows are desired for energy conservation, installing triple-track sash on the inside or outside of windows and painting them to match the historic window sash in color.

The HARB discourages:

- installing artificial materials;
- abrasively cleaning the masonry on upper stories;
- altering or infilling a window opening and flattening a window opening's arch (see section below on "Door and window openings").

Sensitive rejuvenation from inappropriate alterations restored and revitalized a commercial facade.

Roof cornices
The cornice, located at the roof line, often contains the most detailed ornamentation on a historic commercial building. Where possible, historic cornices should be repaired and preserved.

The HARB discourages:

- the removal or covering of historic wood, metal or brick cornices.

The HARB recommends:

- the replacement of previously removed or severely deteriorated cornices with wood or an appropriate synthetic material, which provides the look, but not the expense, of the original.
Residential buildings
While most residential buildings in Lower Merion’s historic districts continue to serve their original use, alterations and renovations are often desirable to suit the needs of modern families. Some residential buildings require renovation for adaptation to commercial or institutional use, a solution usually preferable to new construction in a historic district. Some common alteration and renovation projects involving residential properties include porch enclosure, dormer window additions and the alteration of door and window openings.

The HARB encourages homeowners and developers to consider the least intrusive means possible when undertaking renovation projects, for example, re-configuring existing interior spaces rather than enclosing an open porch. When exterior alterations or renovations are absolutely necessary, the HARB encourages you to consider the following guidelines.

Porch alterations
A common alteration to historic residences is the enclosure of an originally open porch. The best porch enclosures are reversible, that is, they can be removed without damaging important elements of the primary building. While the HARB discourages the practice of enclosing porches, there are ways to make your porch a year-round space while preserving its historic character.

The HARB recommends:
- recessing screens or clear glass (using the minimal number of vertical and horizontal framing members necessary) behind existing architectural details, such as scrollwork, posts and balustrades.

The HARB discourages:
- using pre-fab manufactured metal “Florida rooms” or “bump-outs/greenhouses” on portions of buildings that can be seen from the road or sidewalk;
- using solid materials such as wood, stucco or masonry to enclose porches. They not only detract from the historic character of a house, but are usually irreversible.

When other porch renovations are necessary, such as altering the design of a porch railing, columns or stairs, follow the HARB’s general guidelines for renovation and alteration projects. Make minimal alterations using design elements and scale that are compatible with the original building and use original or compatible materials where possible.

Dormer windows
The addition of a dormer window or skylight to a historic residence can dramatically alter the building’s design and appearance. It is important to note that a new dormer window should be compatible with the original building. Often there are other precedents for dormer types on buildings in the general neighborhood.

The HARB recommends:
- locating the new dormer window or skylight on a roof slope not visible from the road or sidewalk if possible;
- using a dormer design that is in keeping with the character and scale of the original building;
- using different, but compatible detailing, wall planes, roof lines, materials, siding and window types.

Door and window openings
While sensitive door and window replacement need not alter the design of a historic building, the alteration of door and window openings almost always changes a building’s design and character. If door and window openings must be modified, consider the following guidelines.

The HARB recommends:
- making new door and window openings similar in proportion to the original openings; using new door and window treatments that are similar to existing treatments elsewhere on the building;
- keeping new openings in the same location as previous openings. It is preferable to widen or lengthen an existing window opening to create a door opening rather than creating a completely new opening elsewhere on the facade.

In all cases the HARB discourages:
- infilling door and window openings with solid materials, such as wood, stucco or masonry.

Who Can Help Me?
If you are considering making an alteration or renovation, 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.
Further reading

Property owners considering alteration and renovation projects are encouraged to review the following books and brochures. Check your local or regional library for these sources.


This publication was initiated and overseen by the Township of Lower Merion Planning and Community Development Department under a grant from the Bureau for Historic Preservation of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and by the Township of Lower Merion through the Community Development Block Grant Program.

This project has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior.

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