

HISTORIC BEACON HILL DISTRICT

Architectural Guidelines

The historic Beacon Hill district, the oldest historic district in Massachusetts, originated in 1955 by an act of the Massachusetts General Court (Chapter 616 of the Acts of 1955, as amended). It has since been extended to include virtually all of the Hill. The purpose of the law is:

- to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation of the historic Beacon Hill district, and to maintain said district as a landmark in the history of architecture and as a tangible reminder of old Boston as it existed in the early days of the commonwealth. To achieve this purpose, the statute authorizes the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission to review proposed changes to the exterior architectural features of buildings within the historic district before any alteration is undertaken and before a building permit is issued. The relevant section of the law states:
- The commission shall determine whether the proposed construction, reconstruction, alteration, change in exterior color or demolition of the exterior architectural feature involved will be appropriate to the preservation of the historic Beacon Hill district for the purposes of this act.... In passing upon appropriateness, the commission shall consider, in addition to any other pertinent factors, the historical and architectural value and significance, architectural style, general design, arrangement, texture, material and color of the exterior architectural feature involved and the relationship thereof to the exterior architectural features of other involved structures in the immediate neighborhood.

Owners contemplating changes to the exterior of any building within the Historic Beacon Hill district should be aware that no alteration will be approved that is inappropriate to the historical character, architectural design, and materials of the building or its setting. Furthermore, changes over time to buildings are evidence of the history of individual buildings and the neighborhood; some of these changes resulted in major modifications to the style and character of a building and shall be considered part of its historic integrity. Other changes, although not altering the dominant style of the building, may have acquired significance due to age, quality, and irreplaceability, and, if so, shall be considered part of the historic fabric of the building. For individuals without a detailed knowledge of architectural history, it is often difficult to recognize which details are appropriate to which buildings or architectural styles. Anyone filing an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness is, therefore, encouraged to read these guidelines carefully, to consult in advance with the staff of the Environment Department or to refer to the books and articles listed at the end of these guidelines. Applications are available from either the Environment Department, City Hall, Room 805 (617-635-3850) or the Beacon Hill Civic Association, 74 Joy Street (617-227-1922). Each application is considered on its individual merits, but the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission will act in accordance with the following guidelines:

INTRODUCTORY GUIDELINES

1. Original or historically significant materials and/or architectural features shall be maintained and repaired whenever possible rather than replaced.

2. In the event that replacement of existing materials or features if necessary, the new materials shall match the materials being replaced in composition, design, color, texture, and other visible qualities.
3. Replacement of missing architectural features shall be based on evidence of original features, substantiated by physical or pictorial information. Proposals for new work shall be based on evidence of appropriate detail with regard to size, shape, material and design.
4. All architectural changes shall be appropriate either to the original style of the building (if it has not been significantly altered) or to its altered style (if it has been significantly altered to reflect characteristics of a later style).
5. Contemporary design for new buildings may be considered if such design is of excellent quality and is compatible with the size, scale, color, materials, and character of neighboring buildings and environment.
6. All proposals shall show evidence that work will be executed with the highest quality material and workmanship.
7. No new openings in facades shall be allowed, and no changes shall be made to existing window and door openings (unless they involve restoration of original features).
8. All elevations and floor levels on a building should have a unified treatment and changes should occur simultaneously throughout a building. This applies in particular to buildings with multiple ownership.
9. All roof-top HVAC and other mechanical/electrical installations should be located out of public view. Parabolic, "dish" or other directional or similar communications antennae should be installed in such a manner that they are not visible from a public way.
10. The Commission will not formally review an application until all zoning issues have been resolved through the Board of Appeal.
11. A Certificate of Appropriateness is valid for two years. If work has not commenced after two years, a new application must be filed.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

Masonry

1. Cleaning of masonry is often discouraged because the darkening over time of building facades tends to produce a distinctive and uniform appearance and because inappropriate cleaning practices may cause irreversible damage to the masonry. Masonry facades should be cleaned only when necessary to halt deterioration. The most gentle cleaning method possible shall be used and shall be tested on an inconspicuous area to be certain that it will not damage or change the material. All proposed treatments shall be field tested and reviewed. Brick and stone shall not be sandblasted (because abrading the surface with dry grit or hydrochloric blasting or dissolving the surface with inappropriate chemical cleaners will expose the soft interior core of the masonry to the elements).

2. The application of water-repellent coatings or other treatments is discouraged, and samples of any proposed treatment shall be tested before application.
3. Masonry facades shall not be painted unless there is evidence that the building was painted originally.
4. Brownstone may require special treatments involving replacement materials and coatings; each situation will be considered individually based on the existing condition of the material. Any replacement material must approximate brownstone in composition, appearance, and texture.
5. Repointing should avoid the visual conflict between new mortar and aged brick and maintain the continuity of surface due to age and weathering. Repointing is in many cases unnecessary, but when necessary, the following general rules shall be followed.
 - No mortar of a mixture stronger than 1 part cement to 2 parts lime to 7 to 9 parts sand shall be used (to allow for the expansion of bricks during freeze/thaw cycles).
 - Mortar used for spot pointing shall match the adjacent mortar. The color of all mortar should come from the aggregate and not from the binder.
 - Mortar used for total façade repointing shall match the original color of the mortar used when the building was built or altered to achieve its present architectural style; or it shall match aged or weathered mortar color.
 - Joints shall be struck to match the original mortar joints, if apparent, or shall be struck to a slightly concave joint, or raked back at least 1/8-inch, or finished to a weathered profile which slopes inward from top to bottom or the reverse. Smearing (or “battered”) joints and flush joints are inappropriate. Upon completion of the repointing, all remaining mortar and residual film shall be cleaned from the façade of the building.

Roofs and Roof Structures

1. Original or historic rooflines, including dormer windows, chimneys, parapets end walls, and firewalls shall be retained.
2. If, under special circumstances, alterations are permitted, they shall be contingent upon:
 - Ensuring that adequate architectural or photographic documentation, sufficient to permit the alteration to be reversed, is submitted with the application and deposited with the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission
 - Preserving the roof slope unchanged at each side of the alteration.
 - Retaining sufficient structure of any existing dormer window so that its original profile is evident.

- Materials used for roofing repairs shall duplicate the original or appropriate existing materials.
- Roof decks and deck enclosures that are visible from a public way are discouraged. Opaque screening fences on roofs shall not be allowed. New roof access structures should consist of counter-weighted hatches or low-profile headhouses which are not open to public view (or are minimally open to view only at a great distance).
- Unpainted mill-finished aluminum is inappropriate to the historic district and shall not be used for flashing, gutters, or downspouts.

Windows, Sash and Shutters

1. Original or historic material shall not be removed; existing openings, sash, glass, lintels, sills, shutter hardware, frames, and surrounds, shall be retained or duplicated in the same material and style if beyond repair.
2. Removal of historic window sash is discouraged. Replacement sash must exactly match the existing in appearance and material (including through-glass muntins). Simulated muntins (including snap-in, surface-applied, or between-glass muntin grids) shall not be permitted. Vinyl-clad and metal-framed sash are inappropriate; no metal panning of the wood frame is allowed, and no changes shall occur to the dimensions of brick openings, jambs or sashes.
3. Only single-paned sash is appropriate for multi-light replacement windows; in multi-light windows with insulating glass, the exaggerated width of the muntins and the reflectivity of the aluminum foil spacers are inappropriate details.
4. Only clear-paned, non-tinted glass shall be used (except to replace original stained glass). Mirrored and tinted heat-reflective glass are not appropriate.
5. Window blinds (shutters) are not permitted on buildings on which they are inappropriate. Where replacement blinds are installed, they shall be wood-constructed and match the height and one-half the width of the window opening and replicate a traditional blind. Contemporary, vinyl, or metal blinds are prohibited. All blinds shall be properly secured with shutter hardware, including pintles and propeller shutter dogs.
6. Exterior combination storm windows may be acceptable provided the installation has minimal visual impact upon the original fenestration. Storm windows shall have narrow perimeter framing (which does not obscure the glazing of the primary window). The meeting rail of the primary window must align with that of the storm sash. The painted finish on the storm window frame must match the color of the window trim. Exterior storm windows will not be approved from windows with arches, leaded glass, faceted frames, or bent glass. Interior storm window panels may be an appropriate alternative to exterior combination storm windows.

Doors and Entries

1. Original or historically significant entries (including reveals, doors, surrounds, vestibule sidewalks, transoms or fanlights, sidelights and other features) may not be altered.
2. New doors shall be appropriate to the existing surround in style, material and proportions.
3. Only paneled doors of appropriate design, material and assembly shall be permitted; flush doors (with or without surface molding) and metal clad doors shall not be permitted.
4. Storm doors (aluminum, or wood-framed) shall not be allowed unless evidence is presented that they were originally in use in the building.
5. Replacement door hardware should replicate the original or be of an appropriate design.
6. Exterior lighting shall be in traditional locations (e.g. suspended from vestibule ceilings). The design of these fixtures should be of an appropriate size and not imitate styles earlier than the building.
7. Buzzers, key keepers, and intercom panels shall be flush-mounted onto the brick face of the building. Such panels should be of brass and not of brushed aluminum or of gold anodized aluminum. Individualized buzzers are more appropriate than large panels.

Trim

1. Architectural elements including but not limited to cornices, brackets, window lintels and sills, oriel or bay windows, balconies, grilles, grates, lamp brackets, scrapers and handrails shall not be removed from buildings.
2. If any element of architectural trim has deteriorated beyond repair, it shall be replaced to duplicate the original in every way.
3. If any element of architectural trim is known to be missing, its replacement is strongly encouraged.

Paint

1. When painting is necessary, discovering and reapplying paint colors based on evidence of an original scheme or using colors from the historical collections or various painting companies shall be encouraged. Paint color shall be appropriate to the period of the building. Off-white paints are preferable to brilliant white.
2. Materials and features that have never been or were not intended to be painted (e.g. copper, granite, brick, sandstone, and lintels, sills stoops) shall not be painted.
3. Masonry reveals in window and door openings shall not be painted.
4. Allowing existing paint on a masonry surface to weather is in most cases preferable to repainted. Removal of paint from masonry surfaces should occur only after careful evaluation of a sample test

patch. Inappropriate paint removal procedures (e.g. wire brushing, sandblasting) cause irreversible damage to the masonry and are prohibited.

5. Particular attention should be directed to routine painting of decorative pressed metal cornices. When painted, pressed metal cornices should correspond in color to the natural stone of window lintels on the lower elevations.

Ironwork

1. Original or early architectural ironwork shall be compatible with the style of the property on which they are to be installed.
2. New or replacement iron features shall be compatible with the style of the property on which they are to be installed.
3. Window grilles shall be mounted within the window reveal and secured into mortar joints (not into the masonry and not onto the face of the building).
4. Window grilles for most buildings should have pierced horizontal rails or butt-welded joints.
5. Fire escapes on street facades of buildings will be permitted only when required for safety and an alternative egress route is clearly not possible. Fixed diagonal stairways are discouraged.

SIGN GUIDELINES

1. In addition to design review, all signs shall conform with the requirements of the Boston Sign Code (as amended). The term "sign" shall include flat board signs, applied letters, projecting signs and display boxes.
2. Applicants shall provide sufficient evidence and documentation of a proposal to permit an informed decision by the commission and a subsequent review of compliance. This may include photographs, drawings, samples of materials and paint colors, a summary of other signs on the building, exterior lighting conditions and other appropriate considerations.
3. Approval of a given sign shall be limited to the owner of the business or building and shall not be transferable; signs shall be removed or resubmitted for approval when the operation or purpose of the advertised business changes.
4. Antique signs or faithful replicas may be considered favorably. Documentation of the historical appropriateness of a proposed sign may consist of early photographs and similar sources. The historical appropriateness of a sign for a building should be considered.
5. The commission will consider: the appearance of a proposed sign on the building and on nearby buildings; the effect of the sign on decorative and other architectural details; and ancillary structures (e.g., supporting brackets) required for installation.

6. Materials and workmanship should be of excellent quality and durability.
7. The number of signs, their location, and their method of attachment are significant design considerations and each should relate to the size of the shop-front and to the scale of the building.
8. Projecting signs and display boxes shall be considered appropriate in some locations.
9. Graphics shall be limited to a single sign and/or display box per business, except for one additional projecting sign per building.
10. Exterior walls may not be used for display of merchandise or temporary advertising boards.
11. Existing signs of particular historic or architectural merit should be preserved.
12. Neon and back-lit signs are not permitted within the historic district; illumination of signs is discouraged.
13. Freestanding signs are not permitted.

SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The following publications may be considered part of these guidelines:

An Act, Chapter 616 of the Acts of 1955, Establishing the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission, By-Laws

The Boston Sign Code. Revised Ed. Boston: Boston Redevelopment Authority, 1981.

The following publications are not officially part of these guidelines but may be helpful:

Hume, Gary and Weeks, Kay, Ed., The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Revised Edition. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1983.

Preservation Briefs. National Park Service.

Respectful Rehabilitation: Answers to Your Questions about Old Buildings. Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1982.

Weinhardt, Carl J., Jr. The Domestic Architecture of Beacon Hill, 1800-1850. Boston: The Bostonian Society, 1973.