



The Local Landmarker

Issue 9, September 2008



The Perry Building, on the corner of Court and Chenango Streets in Downtown Binghamton.

Built in 1876 and designed by noted 19th Century architect Isaac Perry, the Perry Building is Binghamton's only "cast iron" building. Its two façades are made of individual cast parts bolted together. This industrial revolution-era technology created highly decorative building elements at a cost far lower than the traditional carved wood or stone. Since the decorative iron façade elements were also structural, they allowed the use of large windows such as those seen in the Perry Building. The material itself offered a measure of fireproofing. Finally, this was the modular construction technology of its time. Components of an entire building façade could be cast in foundries, shipped across the United States by rail, and then installed quickly and easily on site. Binghamton has been a CLG since 1988.

From the Coordinator

This issue

New construction, in historic districts or adjacent to existing historic buildings, has apparently been on the minds of a lot of review board members lately. Over the past several months, wherever I am, either meeting with a well established preservation commission, or a community just starting to talk about putting together a local commission, this issue has come up over and over again. I can understand why local preservationists may be so concerned about new construction. Traditionally, preservation commissions are established primarily to deal with preserving *existing* historic buildings, and this is easily understood. The review process focuses on the retention or alteration of historic features, materials, or overall character elements which already exist in a concrete, physical form. An entirely new building proposal can make reviewers uneasy. The abstract nature of questions about compatibility, materials, scale, and style can leave commission members feeling out of their depth. However, dealing with new construction in relation to historic buildings and districts is an important part of the job of a commission member, since the historic character of historic resources can be impacted greatly by adjacent new buildings.

This issue of the *Landmarker* will address new construction, drawing from several excellent sources already out there. Please note however, that you will not find a “one-size-fits-all” guide that will make these reviews fool-proof; what I hope to achieve is to give commission members the tools to go forth more confidently in undertaking reviews involving new buildings. I always say that preservation commissions are “managing change” rather than preventing it. Our task is not to simply prevent bad design and alterations, but to encourage owners and designers to work towards good, new design. Ensuring that a new building is compatible with its existing surroundings while also allowing it to represent the next chapter of the community’s built history is exactly that type of balancing exercise.



Julian Adams, CLG Coordinator

Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau
P.O. Box 189; Waterford, NY 12188-0189
(518) 237-8643, ext. 3271
Julian.Adams@oprhp.state.ny.us

CLG Listserv: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NYSCLGS/>

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New Construction in Historic Districts

Approaching the issue of new construction in historic districts can leave many preservation commissions and architectural review board members feeling uneasy. In many ways, the process is uncharted territory. Unlike reviewing changes to existing buildings, the slate seems blank, open to all manner of pitfalls and questions. Should the building look exactly like the historic ones in the district? Should the building be radically different so as to “stand out” as clearly modern? Should a middle road be taken, wherein new design finds a good fit with the district? If you are familiar with new construction projects in historic districts, you have probably seen all three, with varying degrees of success. Actually, if you have seen the first approach, where a building has been made to look exactly like the existing historic ones, you may not have realized you were seeing a new building at all! So, with various approaches and many more questions, how do you begin?

Perhaps the best place to start is to think about the nature of historic districts themselves. Historic districts are typically made up of buildings constructed over a number of years. While they may be united by a common or related land use, the structures represent the work of a number of designers and builders and, therefore, vary in their architectural styles, building technology, and materials. Except for districts which were built as one large development, such as mill workers’ housing, or a row of brownstones or bungalows, many districts evolved through a continual process of construction. Just like members of a family, buildings can be visually distinct and yet readily identifiable as belonging to different generations which share some genetic code. The final result is that we can look at historic districts as having been developed using a code that creates a sense of place.

A “Family” of Buildings

So, to follow the analogy of a district having been developed along a certain “code” or guidelines, the code must be unraveled, much like modern genetic scientists unravel the code or guidelines that create organisms. Once these guidelines are found, they can be applied to new construction, guiding new buildings to be compatible with existing buildings.

Simple? At first thought it seems so. However, there is one major stumbling block for many commission members and architects as they look to apply what they’ve learned about a district’s development and apply it to how a new building should fit within the district. If you are familiar with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation (See *The Local Landmarker*, December 2006, which can read online, or downloaded and printed, at www.nysparks.state.ny.us/shpo/certified/landmarker.htm, or visit the National Park Service web version at www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/rhb/), you might know Standard #9, which states:

New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment

Although this standard is directed at the work planned for a specific historic building, it is also applicable to entirely new construction in historic districts. Most people summarize it as the “compatible but contemporary” test. This means that a building should be compatible with its surroundings, but should be contemporary in appearance, never looking like a duplicate historic building. This balancing act of ensuring that a building looks new while fitting in has been the cause of many a headache on the part of a commission and a project architect.

I'd like to go back at the genetics idea, using an experience I had at a family wedding some years ago.. One of my first cousins was getting married to a girl from out of town, so the wedding was the first time most of the extended families had met. When the bride, her mother and her grandmother stood together for photos at the reception, we all remarked on how it looked as if the same woman was there in front of us at different stages of life. First there was the bride, young and beaming, dressed in an up-to-date jacket and skirt outfit for the honeymoon trip; next was the mother, of course older than her daughter. She was dressed as you might expect the mother of the bride to be, somewhat more conservatively than her daughter, but coordinated to the wedding party. She and her daughter favored each other strongly in face, figure, and hair. Next was the grandmother, mother to the bride's mother. Her outfit was not necessarily old fashioned, but age appropriate, and while she did favor both her daughter and granddaughter, her age, life experience, and wisdom showed clearly in her face as well as how she carried herself.

I use this to show how three individuals can be separate, being of different ages and life experiences, but because they share some common “codes” (in this case, truly genetic ones) they have features in common. Each of the women above expressed their age, their life, their own tastes in certain areas, but overall, they were identifiable as related and as family. The same can be accomplished with buildings if you understand the codes and guidelines that exist within a different type of “family”, a historic district.

The “Codes” of Historic Districts

If you begin to look for the common features of an historic district, some will be fairly apparent. Are buildings a similar size in height and width? Are they of a similar material? Do they have some common design elements? Do they create a rhythm as you look down the street because of the scale and placement of elements such as windows or doors? These questions and others are the right ones to ask if you wish to understand what the district's overall character is, and what “codes” a new building must follow in order to become a good addition to the district. Although there are many different ways of looking at the character of a district, I'd like to list those aspects I feel are crucial to understanding new construction parameters for the area.

1. **Height/Scale:** These words are often used interchangeably and refer to the height of a building and its individual floors compared to the average human height. Many districts have buildings that are similar in height or scale, without one towering over the other. This is not always true, however; some historic commercial districts having buildings of varying heights. Also some lower scale districts may have institutional buildings that are larger than surrounding buildings. These types of

buildings are typically specially designed and used structures such as schools or churches and do not reflect the overall character of the district.

2. **Setback:** Setback refers to how far a building is located from the street, the rear of the lot or from adjoining buildings. For purposes of compatibility, the most important setback consideration would be the front setback, or how far the building is from the street. The two most easily grasped examples of differing front setbacks would be those of a traditional commercial district and a traditional residential neighborhood. In most traditional commercial districts, buildings are constructed right up to the sidewalk, with no lawn or space separating them from the sidewalk. In many traditional neighborhoods, there is a lawn space in front of the house, separating the house from the sidewalk. These setbacks (front, side, and rear) can be small or somewhat sizable; however, they are typically consistent on a block or street.
3. **Rhythm:** As buildings form a line down a block or street, certain rhythms can be found. Sometimes it is in the way that the width of houses can repeat one after the other. Some rhythms can be seen in the “solid to void” ratio of window openings, doors, or in the spacing between the buildings themselves. This rhythm is important in the overall feel of a district.
4. **Massing:** Massing means the form of a building, including the roofline, porch or porches, and overall profile and shape of the building. This massing can be blocky, slender, asymmetrical, symmetrical, vertical, or horizontal.
5. **Materials:** Many districts contain buildings constructed or clad in similar materials. Throughout New York State, the primary materials found include clapboard, stone masonry, brick masonry, concrete, and metal. Materials can be very specific to the historic use of an area; urban commercial and residential areas are typically masonry, while early streetcar suburbs can contain block after block of clapboarded houses. Some historic industrial areas across the state have more utilitarian and specialized materials, such as the concrete grain elevators in Buffalo, or the historic metal clad ship piers along the Hudson River in New York City.
6. **Features:** This simply means items such as cornices, storefronts, porches, or any other such thing is common to the district. The neighborhoods of Saratoga Springs adjacent to the historic racetrack are largely distinguished by their full-front single story porches, constructed to “take the breezes” and enjoy neighborhood life. In many historic commercial districts, projecting cornices along the building’s top were ubiquitous, as were smaller cornices above the storefront level.

What Do These Codes Mean for New Construction?

Using the items above to understand how historic buildings fit together to form a district is the start to understanding how a new building should fit in as well

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- A new building should respect the **height** and **scale** of the majority of the existing historic buildings. A typical rule of thumb is for any new construction is that its height remains within 10-15% of those to either side of the site, and that floor heights not be radically different.
 - A new building should follow the building **setbacks** typical to the district, and not “break” the setback by being significantly closer to or farther way from the sidewalk than the buildings within the district. If the buildings in the district have greatly varying setbacks, it would be best to choose a setback that finds a “middle ground” between the two buildings adjacent to the new building site.
 - A new building should pick up on the **rhythm** of the district; in solid to void ratios, in door openings, and other defining characteristics. In cases where a new building will be wider than surrounding historic buildings, it may be possible to break it into components that mimic the rhythm of the other buildings along the street. This may require setbacks or “reveals” between the sections or changes in materials so that in a streetscape view, the new building continues rather than breaks the neighborhood rhythm
 - The **massing** of a new building should respect that of the buildings within the district. This pertains to roofline, form, how the parts of the building “fit” together, and other features. If the surrounding historic buildings are blocky in massing (fairly square with flat roofs), the new building should follow that form. If the surrounding historic buildings have asymmetrical massing (such as found in many Queen Anne Style houses), or symmetrical massing (as found in many Colonial Revival buildings) the new building should pick up on that form.
 - The **materials** of a new building within a historic district should reflect those of the surrounding buildings. In some cases, this can be interpreted to allow the use of modern materials that have the appearance of the traditional materials, such as cement-fiber clapboard in place of actual wooden clapboard. Where metal is the overall aesthetic, a modern coated metal can be utilized in part of the building to recall the surrounding structures.
 - Where a district has character defining **features** that are part of the component buildings, this should be reflected in any new infill construction. If a historic residential district has porches as one of the main unifying features of the buildings, a new building should also have a porch. In commercial districts with bold cornices, the new building should have a cornice or cornice type feature at the top of the street façade. This is where creativity and design can really have expression. Abstracting details or interpreting them in new materials or forms can go far in letting a new building fit in without being duplicative.

Potential Pitfalls

It is very important to understand that new buildings in historic districts should **not** fit in so well that the casual viewer is confused about the age of the new structure in context with

the existing ones. There are cases where a new building actually copies other buildings in the district, and as such becomes entirely invisible as a new structure. Remember that many districts are made of structures built over a number of years or decades. In many cases the difference in construction date can be read by a change in style, material, or other aspects, sometimes subtle, sometimes striking. Just as the existing buildings in a district clearly represent the age in which they were built, the new building should represent its age and construction date, while fitting into the surrounds. Thinking back to the family wedding, no one could confuse the bride and her grandmother for each other, but everyone knew that they were related.

Remember, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to compatibility. A key concept is that guidelines for new construction should not be so much about preventing bad design or bad buildings as enabling and encouraging good new design. Additionally, please note that some districts may not fit into the “family” concept, and may consist of buildings that are widely varying in scale, height, materials, setback, etc. These districts may be bound together by historical association rather than any uniform developmental history. It would be a mistake to try and apply guidelines such as those above to these types of districts. It would be best to ensure that any new building represents the next phase of the district’s developmental history than adhering to any one form or style.

What Next?

It is important for members of commission and boards to educate themselves on this issue. A great way to start is simply to go out and look at existing historic districts for the “codes” mentioned above. Each district may have different ways that the buildings relate to each other in all of the aspects noted above. It is important to assess the overall cohesive nature of the district. The degree of homogeneity or variety among the buildings will guide the degree to which a new building should relate to others along the streetscape.

One cure for the discomfort of working with abstract ideas is to hit the streets and look for concrete examples of new buildings that can be evaluated for how well they follow the historic district’s guidelines. In your own community or while visiting others, take pictures, annotate them with your observations and to begin to build a visual collection of districts and buildings. In doing so, you will learn more not only about compatible new construction, but more about your community and the various districts, buildings, and “codes” inherent in them.

Featured Website

FRESH

The Georgia State Historic Preservation Office has developed a good set of guidelines for new construction in historic districts. They call it FRESH, which stands for

- **F**ootprint
- **R**oofline
- **E**nvelope
- **S**kin
- **H**oles

The website takes the form of a slideshow with simple text and photographs that illustrate the points in each letter. As you will see, many of the points echo those in this newsletter, perhaps with slightly different names. However, the concepts are the same and the website is a good visual introduction to new construction in historic districts.



http://www.gashpo.org/assets/documents/fresh_clg.pdf

The Back Page



A closer view of the Perry Building, showing the decorative elements of one of the projecting windows. Entire building facades were constructed with such parts, ordered from foundry catalogs. If you have an iron storefront or entire façade in your town, they were most likely ordered the same way. Paint may obscure the original nature of the metal (some have been mistaken for stone, which would make the original manufacturers happy, as this was one of the intents of casting the metal into classical forms!), but a magnet will help you locate the cast iron elements. Many times if you look closely at the base of the upright elements you can find the name and location of the foundry. Another reason to get to know your historic districts!