

Historic Landmarks and Preservation Districts Commission: Top Myths and Mistakes

The following list describes some of the most common myths about local historic preservation districts and mistakes made by property owners. We encourage property owners to contact the Landmarks Commission staff before starting any exterior work other than ordinary repairs to determine whether design review is required. Avoid the pitfalls of non-compliance and help preserve the unique historic character of our City's neighborhoods!

1. Myth: Landmarks Commission Design Review Guidelines only apply to the front of the house.

This is one of the most common misconceptions. Any alteration that modifies or adds to the outside of an existing structure, and any new construction or demolition on the property, must be reviewed and approved by the Landmarks Commission. Design review guidelines apply to the front, back, and sides of structures. Site changes, like tree removal, fencing, and parking areas, may require review as well.

2. Mistake: Replacing exterior doors with new historically incompatible doors.

The most common example of this mistake is the installation of 6-panel doors in Victorian or Craftsman style houses. The 6-panel door is a Colonial Revival style door, which is not compatible with these other styles. Other common door mistakes are the "moon door" (a panel door with arched window at the top), or a contemporary interpretation of a traditional door (large oval highly decorative glass) that is out of character with the house. In general, retaining and repairing historic doors should always be preferred over replacement where possible.

3. Mistake: Using vinyl replacement windows on the front facade.

Solid vinyl replacement windows are not permitted on street-visible facades. These facades generally have the most character-defining features including the windows. If existing windows cannot be repaired, they should be replaced with wood (or wood windows with vinyl or aluminum cladding) that match the existing configuration and operation of the original windows. Other historic materials, such as steel, are reviewed on a case by case basis. Replacement windows should fill the original window openings (e.g., do not put a 30"-wide window in a 36"-wide brick opening).

4. Myth: Roof replacements do not need Landmarks approval.

Roof replacement projects *do* need to be reviewed and approved unless the roofing exactly matches the previous roof. The color of the shingles should be reviewed in particular: darker grays, slate colors, and warm grays are recommended. White, tan, and black shingles should be avoided. Retaining and repairing slate, tile, and sheet metal roofs and ornamentation is encouraged.

5. Myth: Rear wood decks are not regulated by Landmarks.

Landmarks design review guidelines cover rear deck construction, including the appropriate design of the wood railings (if any), and require that wood decks be opaque stained or painted. These guidelines also apply to exterior stairs and fire escapes.

6. Mistake: Painting brick that has not already been painted.

Painting original brick, stone, or stucco that has not already been painted is not permitted by the guidelines. In the past, brick was painted to cover dirt before modern cleaning techniques were developed. Painting unpainted brick covers

existing problems and automatically creates more maintenance down the road. Consult with Landmarks staff when planning to repaint masonry that has already been painted.

7. Mistake: Wrapping cornices and woodwork with vinyl or aluminum and installing vinyl siding on wood frame structures.

Vinyl and aluminum are relatively modern construction products that generally work well when used in new construction that is designed to use these products. Wrapping original wood elements on historic buildings such as horizontal siding, eaves, porches, cornices, fascia, window or door trim, etc with vinyl or aluminum products can be problematic in several ways. First, such "wrapping" visually obscures the architectural detail of historic buildings. In addition to obscuring detail, wrapping can cover any existing maintenance problems- often the reason for the wrapping in the first place- and allow the deterioration to continue out of sight and unabated. Finally, historic wood detail elements and siding was constructed to "breathe" through natural ventilation detailing and to adjust to the natural heating and cooling cycles of the seasons. Just as the introduction of modern interior heating and cooling equipment affects the thermal and moisture dynamics of historic construction, so does "wrapping" historic wood siding and detailing with vinyl and aluminum products. These "wrap" products are designed primarily to shed moisture and prevent its entry into a structure. Conversely they are effective at keeping moisture and vapors *within* a structure. The retention of moisture and vapor can quickly and significantly deteriorate a historic wood structure.

"Wrap" systems that are billed as "breathable" depend heavily on specific detailing, proper installation, and regular maintenance for long term effectiveness.

When considering this type of work, contact Landmarks staff early in the process to evaluate the structure and its issues, and the possible effects and proper use of new materials.

8. Myth: Assuming what works for your neighbor's house will work for yours.

It is best to consult with the Landmarks Commission staff before assuming that the work your neighbors just completed on their 1930's bungalow would be perfect for your Queen Anne style Victorian house as well. Preservation districts often have more than one architectural style represented. Additionally, various alterations may have occurred over the years- usually prior to district designation- that may affect the historic integrity of a structure. Thus, alterations and additions to houses need to be evaluated for compatibility on an individual basis.

9. Mistake: Using modern mortar mixes for tuckpointing historic buildings.

Modern mortar mixes have a high Portland cement content which produces a harder, less porous joint. The harder mortar can crack the softer bricks and lead to moisture problems by trapping moisture inside the wall. Historic mortar is seldom white or cold gray in color like modern concrete. Tinting the new mortar to match the old is important to avoid a piecemeal, patchy appearance.

10. Myth: New construction must be of a traditional design- contemporary design is discouraged.

New construction is not unusual in the districts, be it a new garage or a new home. A basic premise in historic preservation is that each structure or work is be historically "true", or representative of the time in which it was constructed. Conversely, a false historic approach or replication is discouraged. For existing structures this means that new modifications or additions should "respect" or respond to the style and scale of the existing structure in a generally subordinate fashion to avoid visually overpowering the original structure.

For new construction, particularly principle structures, the design may be quite contemporary. Contemporary designs are reviewed for their visual relationships to existing, surrounding structures and the district as a whole. Compatibility of size, scale, and massing are paramount and the new work should physically work well within its surroundings. Each situation is unique and is carefully considered.

Secondary structures, such as garages, should be visually and physically subordinate to the main structure. This often means simpler design and use of materials as well as shorter height compared to the principle structure. Many neighborhoods have distinct patterns for garages and secondary structures, such as location and height. New garages should also respect these patterns.

11. Myth: Approval for demolition of minor or deteriorated structures or structures is easy to obtain.

The prime Demolition guideline is that "Unless the City of Metro Louisville has determined that it poses an imminent threat to life or property, do not demolish any historic structure or part of a historic structure that contributes to the integrity of any historic district, or any individual landmark or part of an individual landmark."

Due to its permanent and irreversible nature, demolition of *any* structure in a preservation district has an extremely high standard of review. Demolition is also considered on a district level- the demolition of a structure action and any subsequent new work impacts the integrity of the entire district. Structural deterioration alone is NOT a decisive factor in considering the appropriateness of a demolition request. The property owner bears the responsibility for maintenance and upkeep of a structure and allowing a structure to deteriorate is considered "demolition by neglect". Such neglect, and restoration costs incurred to remediate such neglect, is not considered in evaluating a demolition request. Another concept considered in demolition applications is "Economic Hardship", the hardship for a property owner that may result as a decision of the Commission. For a fuller discussion of Economic Hardship and Demolition, please refer to the "Economic Hardship Exemption" Guidelines.

12. Myth: The Landmarks Commission is a grassroots group of neighborhood or preservation activists. Its actions are not official or required to be observed.

The Historic Landmarks and Preservation Districts Commission is an official body of Metro Louisville Government and it is established by Ordinance 32.250 of the Metro Louisville Code of Ordinances. Commissioners are appointed by the Mayor subject to the approval of Metro Council. The Ordinance further describes the qualifications of the Commissioners, their terms of service, and more importantly the multiple directives of the Commission. The Ordinance also describes the design review processes, appeals process, and other aspects of the Commission. As an Ordinance of Metro Louisville Government adherence is required and violations of any provision of this Ordinance are subject to civil penalties described in paragraph 32.262, Penalty.

The Ordinance is posted on this website.