



Borough of Bellefonte

Design Guidelines Bulletin: Character-Defining Features

These guidelines were prepared to assist property owners with information when they are planning changes to their homes or businesses. They are not intended to replace consultation with Historical and Architectural Review Board (HARB) staff and other qualified professionals, such as architects or contractors.

Any change to the exterior of a building in the Historic District must be reviewed by HARB. The HARB uses the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties to review all of its projects. Each application is considered individually for the appropriateness of the project to the building for which it is proposed. Treatments that may be allowable and acceptable in one location may not be appropriate at another.



What is a Character Defining Feature?

According to the National Park Service, a character-defining feature is a prominent or distinctive aspect, quality, or characteristic of a historic property that contributes significantly to its physical character. More simply put, character-defining features are those things that make a property special, make it worthy of inclusion within the historic district, and make it more than one in a crowd. Everything from the famous mansion de-

signed by a renowned architect to the lowly vernacular farmhouse, from farm buildings to bridges, factories to formal gardens has its own character defining features. Any time that one of those features is removed or hidden, it destroys the character of the property and makes it less special.

How can we Identify Character-Defining Features?



Character-defining features are difficult to list in detail because each architectural style has its own features. A Queen-Anne Victorian and a Craftsman Bungalow both have significant features but the details are different. It is difficult to compare the ornately decorative trim work of the first to the strong angular lines of the second. The National Park Service suggests identifying the overall visual character of a building by starting with larger concepts and moving toward small details: shape of the overall building, number and placement of openings (doors, windows), roof shape, configuration, and related features (dormers, chimneys), decorative trim, setting, materials, other details. A worksheet for helping property owners in the identification process is available at <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief17.htm>. A detailed walk through is available at <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/walkthrough/index.htm>. These publica-

tions deal with building interiors as well as the exteriors. Because the Historical and Architectural Review Board (HARB) does not regulate building interiors they will not be discussed in any detail here.



What if, after reading these materials and studying your building, you still aren't sure how to identify the historic features of your property? What if you don't know if your plans will affect the character-defining features of your property? The Borough of Bellefonte has a Historic Preservation Consultant available to meet with property owners to discuss projects. In fact, property owners are encouraged to discuss all projects with the Historic Preservation Consultant while they are still in the planning stages. This can save time and money and eliminate any surprises in the HARB review process.

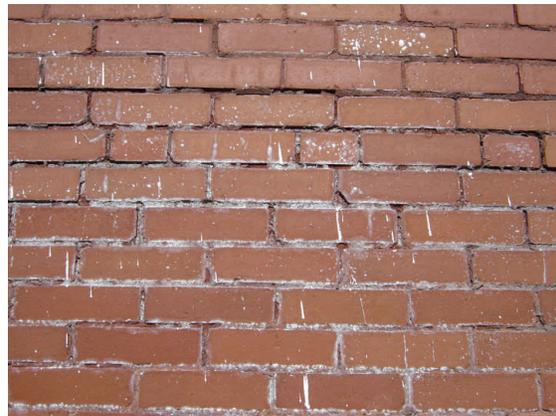
What do we do once we have Completed the Identification Process?

Once you've identified those features that make your property special and unique you can make decisions about how to treat those features. Each property will have its own list of features that require special consideration; however, there are some categories that are common to most properties. Roofs, windows/doors, porches, materials, decorative elements, appropriate color schemes, outbuildings, setbacks, lighting, signage, walkways, fences, and significant landscaping features should be considered. Any planned changes to the exterior of the property will be reviewed by HARB.

HARB uses the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Rehabilitation to make decisions about the

projects it reviews. A copy of these guidelines is available at

http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/standards_guidelines.htm. The following list of features will help guide property owners in choosing recommended treatments for important features. These are the kinds of projects that HARB is likely to approve:



Masonry-The masonry portions of buildings should be considered as important and treated as such; this includes the joints and any strike on the joint. Stone and brick should not be removed or covered with artificial or synthetic materials. Painting of stone or brick should be decided on a case-by-case basis as it is appropriate in some cases but not in others. A qualified person who is familiar with the mortar mixes for historic properties should do repairs and repointing. High pressure blasting and harsh chemical cleaning should be avoided. Using the gentlest means possible to achieve the goal will protect the building for years to come.

Siding- Wood siding should be retained in the same profile and configuration that exists. Wood siding should be properly maintained to give it a long and healthy life. Repair or replacement of wood siding should take the width and profile of the siding into account. The use of synthetic siding where it does not exist should be avoided.

Windows-Every effort should be given to maintaining existing windows. Materials, location, proportions, and details should be given special consideration. Shutters should be retained where they



are original to a property and they should match the size and shape of the window opening. Storm windows can be an easy way to increase energy efficiency of historic windows. Existing storm windows should be maintained. Synthetic replacement windows are highly discouraged and will only be considered in special circumstances. Please refer to the Design Guideline Bulletin on Windows for in-depth information on window projects.



Doors/screen or storm doors-The placement of doors as well as the doors themselves are important. Changing the location of a door can change the feel of a building. Doors often convey a good sense of a property with the details in the woodwork of the surrounds, decorative trim, sidelights, and transoms. All of these features should be retained and doors themselves should never be replaced with modern look-

ing styles or materials. Storm and screen doors should complement the historic door. They should not excessively cover or detract from the entry door.



Roofs—Roofs can have many interesting features. Dormers, brackets, chimneys, cresting, spires, and parapets as well as the overall roof shape all contribute to a building's character and every effort should be made to retain these features in good condition. The roofing material itself should be replaced as necessary with the same material as the original or with similar modern materials. Features should not be removed, changed, or added. Any mechanicals, such as HVAC units, installed on rooftops should be situated so that they are not visible from the public right-of-way.



Painting- Not only is painting important to maintain all of the wood areas of your home, it also helps your home to convey its sense of history. Style-appropriate color choices and color placement can make a home a lovely addition to a streetscape or a nightmare for the neighborhood. Almost any color scheme can be adjusted so that a property owner isn't denied a house in a favorite color. Sometimes shades need to be darker or lighter, placed differently on the building, or complemented with a color to tie it all together. Proper prep work including any repair of deteriorated wood should be considered part of any painting project.



Porches- Porches are important to each individual property and they are also important to the streetscape. It is important to retain original materials and designs in elements like rails, spindles, posts, floors and roofs. Replacing items with artificial or inappropriate materials can ruin one of the biggest assets of a home and blight the streetscape. Porches should not be removed or enclosed. Roof size and shape should not be changed.

Ornamentation-Anything decorative applied to the facade should be taken into consideration. Brackets, “gingerbread”, pediments above doors, cornice features and the like should be retained or replaced in kind.

Outbuildings-Existing outbuildings should be maintained with the same kind of care as the main building. These buildings speak of a time before attached garages. Their relation to the street/alley and to the house makes them important to proper-

ties. Existing outbuildings should not be removed without review, and newly constructed outbuildings should maintain the same kind of relationship to the main building and to the street/alley.



Fences-Fences are neither encouraged nor discouraged within the historic district. HARB reviews applications for fences to be sure that they are compatible with the property and with the historic district. In general, wrought or cast iron, wood, and vegetation (shrubs) are appropriate fencing materials. Synthetic materials such as chain-link or vinyl are generally not acceptable.



Signs-Signs should be kept in scale with the building. Large inappropriate signs should be replaced with smaller historically compatible signs. Colors should be compatible with the building and to the surrounding streetscape. Place signs so that they do not obscure important features of the building. These suggestions hold true for awnings also.

Relation to the Streetscape-Most of the properties on any given street have similar setbacks from

that street. It would be inappropriate to build an addition to the front of a property that would bring the building closer to the street. It would disrupt the rhythm of the streetscape. Likewise it would be inappropriate to build garages in the front yard or to remove outbuildings from their original locations.



Storefronts—Commercial properties should follow the same general guidelines as residential property owners. Storefronts should not be modified or modernized. Windows and doors should be retained in their original sizes and shapes. Signage should be appropriately sized, shaped and colored for the property. Original materials should be retained. Any replacement materials should be similar to the original materials.



In general, HARB does not permit changes to character-defining features. Any facade visible from a public right-of-way is reviewed by HARB. Lati-

tude may be allowed for those facades that are not considered primary (side and rear).

In summary, identify those character-defining features, details, forms, and materials that are important to your building. Protect and maintain and preserve those features that you have identified. When planning a project focus on maintaining those features. Repair them rather than replace them. If a feature must be replaced, replace it in kind, meaning use the same kind of materials. If the original materials are no longer available use a compatible new material or technique that will match the old in color, texture, and other visual qualities.

If you plan to reconstruct a missing feature be sure that there is physical evidence (shadows or “ghosts” on walls) or documentary evidence like photographs, drawings or examples on similar buildings to document your choices.

New construction within the historic district should fit the character of the neighborhood in terms of scale, materials, massing, proportion, size, and setback. New construction may be a garage to replace an older one, a shed for gardening tools, or another type of outbuilding. It may be a new house or business constructed on a vacant lot. While the new building will not be historic, it should relate to the buildings around it. It should fit in without seeming to be falsely historic. A similar design, similar material, similar setback from the street should be considered. Traditional window and door openings, designs, and materials as well as similar roof shape to those around it also help new





buildings to blend in with their older neighbors.

In Conclusion

Character-defining features are the things that help your property convey its sense of history. Every well-preserved house, storefront, and factory is a snapshot of another time. Tangible evidence of our past helps us to understand our history. Children can see that the industrial revolution didn't happen only in far away places like the fabric mills of New England or the steel mills of Western Pennsylvania. They can see that important and interesting things happened right here in their hometown. Being able to make those connections makes history come alive.



Streets of well-maintained and preserved properties provide attractive neighborhoods for people to live.

Streets of attractive storefronts give people a pleasant place to shop and gather. Preserved industrial complexes can provide continued spaces for industry, or in the case of the Match Factory, Bellefonte, PA can provide interesting commercial space for businesses that require more room than a typical downtown storefront can give.

Property owners who are planning changes to the exterior of their buildings are encouraged to call the Historic Preservation Consultant at 355-1501 ext. 26 before finalizing any plans and before making any contract deposits. Any expense undertaken before Borough Council approves a project is done at the property owner's risk and HARB and Council are not liable for those expenses should a project require modification.

Bibliography:

Some books that may help you to identify important features of your property

McAlester, Virginia. *A Field Guide to American Houses*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984

Blumenson John J.G. *Identifying American Architecture*, rev. ed. Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1981.

Rifkind, Carole. *A Field Guide to American Architecture*, New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1980.



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