

THE IMPACT OF THE PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS
ON NEW DESIGN IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS IN THE UNITED STATES
Ellen Beasley

There are approximately 2000 locally designated historic districts in the United States. The majority of these districts are residential, commercial, or mixed-use in character. In age and architectural content, they range from eighteenth century villages in New England to early twentieth century neighborhoods in California. Local zoning ordinances are the legal means by which municipalities designate the districts. Designation usually follows a planning process that includes a cultural resource survey of the potential district, an analysis of the survey results and other data, a series of public hearings, and the preparation of a plan for the proposed district.

Once a historic district is designated, a preservation commission or board (various names are used) reviews proposed alterations, changes, and demolitions to existing buildings and all new construction within district boundaries. The elected officials of the municipality appoint commission members who serve on a volunteer basis. The make-up and the size of the commissions also are stipulated in the zoning ordinances: they frequently consist of five to nine members with representatives from the design, preservation, legal, and real estate professions as well as property owners in the district(s). Most commissions operate with some staff support but there are those that have no staff support at all.

Comparing Design Review in Nine Communities

New construction is the most difficult issue to review for commissions everywhere, a fact that I discovered when I observed how the Historical District Board in my own town of Galveston, Texas, struggled with the problem in the mid-1970's. I wondered if its experience typified that of similar boards and commissions across the country so, with a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, I conducted a study of new construction in the residential historic districts of nine communities. I am now completing a re-examination of the same communities to document the evolution of the public design review process and how it and/or other factors have influenced new design over a period of time. The Design Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Study in the Fine Arts, and several communities that served as case studies have provided funding.

The nine communities are of varying size, location, and cultural diversity which means that the resources that are available to the preservation commissions also vary. The smallest community is Arrow Rock, Missouri, a village of 85 people. Founded in 1829, Arrow Rock was the embarkation point for the Santa Fe Trail and served as a major commercial river town throughout the nineteenth century. Town and historic district boundaries are synonymous and include a portion of the Arrow Rock State Park. A

five-member Board of Architectural Review administers the district without staff support. In contrast, Indianapolis, Indiana, population close to one million, is the largest community to serve as a case study. At the time of my initial study, Lockerbie Square was the sole historic district in the city. It consists of six square blocks and an architectural mix of nineteenth century residential building types including workers' cottages. Today, there are seven locally designated historic districts in Indianapolis, and the nine-member Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission continues to be supported by a staff of eight.

The remaining seven communities are Alexandria, Virginia; Beaufort, South Carolina; Galveston, Texas; Mobile, Alabama; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Savannah, Georgia; and Telluride, Colorado. Summarizing and analyzing the results of the update study is not easy because there is enough material to write a book about the historic districts--and the people--in each community!

A comparative analysis of new design in historic districts in the United States during the last ten years cannot be divorced from the celebration of the American Bicentennial in 1976 and the passage of the Tax Reform Act of 1976 which offered Federal tax benefits for the rehabilitation of qualifying historic buildings. As a result, the late 1970's witnessed a swelling of the preservation movement and an unprecedented public interest in "historicism." The timing was perfect for wedding those elements with Post-Modern architecture.

These same events affected local preservation commissions and the design review process in historic districts. In the mid-1970's, there were about 500 commissions as compared to the 1200 commissions that now exist. Just in the nine communities that served as case studies for my project, the boundaries of the original historic districts have been enlarged or the number of districts has been increased or both since I conducted the original study. This also means that each community expanded the design review process.

Each of the nine communities experienced some new construction in its historic districts since the late 1970's, but the volume varied. In some cases this was dictated by how much vacant land existed. For example, there are very few vacant lots in the historic districts in Galveston so new construction consisted of auxiliary buildings such as garages, garage/apartments, and sheds. In contrast, there was a tremendous volume of new construction on existing vacant land in and around Lockerbie Square in Indianapolis and in Telluride. In other instances, there was limited or no new development even though there were large parcels of vacant land: the economics and the marketability of the districts did not support it.

Administrative Support Contributes to Self-Assurance

The commissions in all nine communities acquired status over the years. Certainly, they are among the most highly visible public boards which, in part, reflects the controversial nature of some of their activities, especially those involving new construction projects. All the commissions improved administratively which in Arrow Rock means completion of the first survey of the district and a more exacting procedure for submitting applications to the commission whereas in Indianapolis this means completion of surveys, plans, and design guidelines for the additional six districts.

The majority of the nine commissions saw an increase in budget and/or staff which is reflective of a greater awareness of preservation interests by both elected officials and the general public. Surprisingly, only since 1982, have Alexandria, Savannah, and Santa Fe, the three cities with the most widely recognized historical and architectural legacies, created staff positions whose primary responsibilities are support of the preservation commissions. Most of the commissions now receive some training whereas it was virtually non-existent ten years ago.

One can assume that these things have contributed to the greater sense of self-assurance that I detected in all the commissions. Generally, the commissions are more comfortable with their decisions: many decisions pertaining to renovation projects have become routine and while new construction projects remain the most difficult to review, commission members are less defensive about these decisions as well.

Defining "Appropriate" New Design

In the mid-1970's, the design and preservation professions and the public were groping for a consensus of what was "appropriate" or "compatible" infill architecture for historic districts. The general public clearly preferred designs that made some gesture to historic styles. Usually, this meant historic styles or building types that were found in the districts but not always: for example, "Colonial" styles were deemed appropriate in Arrow Rock. On the other hand, professionals in the mid-1970's generally felt that new buildings should respect the scale of a district but should be "contemporary statements." Reaching agreement has not always been easy. In Alexandria, a political furor that erupted over the style of a new building threatened survival of the historic district but eventually resulted in the appointment of all new members to its Board of Architectural Review.

Actually, the gap has narrowed between what the public and the design professions consider to be "appropriate" for new buildings in historic districts. There is a wider acceptance of references to historicism which is related to the Post-Modern movement, especially among the design professions. It should be noted, however, that this reflects a national architectural trend that

is not confined to infill buildings that are located in historic districts or have gone through the public review process. Historicism, Post-Modernism, contextualism, regionalism--call it what you will--extends beyond the boundaries of historic districts.

Members of preservation commissions feel more secure for both legal and aesthetic reasons when they can base their decisions regarding new design on specific design guidelines. Consequently, guidelines have become a more integral part of the review process in the majority of the nine communities. Since the original study, six of the communities have completed an extensive writing or rewriting of design guidelines which usually included a public participation component. The more recently prepared guidelines combine broad urban design issues with the standard identification of district characteristics and architectural styles and details. The earlier guidelines tend to emphasize buildings as isolated, individual units. There is no doubt but that design guidelines have contributed to a more literal historic interpretation for new design in the historic districts of the communities.

Although the lack of architectural variety that is being built in the historic districts is cited by some as one of the negatives of the public review process, it is very clear that the process has had a positive influence in all nine communities. As stated by one commission member, "We have become more affective over the years because people know that they have to get approval so they bring better designs before the commission to begin with. This alone has improved design." One has only to compare what has been built within district boundaries with what has been built outside the districts: projects in the districts show greater attention to such elements as the placement of parking lots, landscaping, materials, and detailing as well as overall design.

Commission members have traded the 1970's concern for the style of new buildings in historic districts with a concern for "quality" and how commissions can require--demand--a higher quality in the materials, workmanship, and details of new construction projects. "Quality" was a word that was seldom mentioned in the late 1970's but it was a point of discussion when revisiting each of the nine communities. It often reflects a conflict between commission members and property owners who are concerned about the long-term preservation of a district and outside developers who are interested in short-term investments.

Land Use Policies versus Preservation Goals

Use, over which most preservation commissions do not have final jurisdiction, and scale are among the most difficult issues with respect to new construction projects in historic districts. These are problems especially in districts where the balance has shifted from residential use to commercial, office or mixed-use or where uses have shifted to tourist-oriented services. Alexandria, Santa Fe, Savannah, and Telluride are primary

examples. New buildings are a much greater scale than are the older buildings that have distinguished these communities. Although they respond to new uses and are allowed by the existing zoning, the new structures put additional pressures on the historic districts for accommodating more traffic, parking more cars--and building more buildings. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the eight-story parking garage that the City of Savannah recently built on Oglethorpe Square, one of the original squares that happens to be named for the founder of Savannah.

The conflict between land-use policies and preservation goals is not unique to these communities nor is the reluctance to resolve the conflict which is a major policy issue involving many commissions. Most communities delay as long as possible balancing preservation interests with intense economic pressures for fear of discouraging development. As a result, preservation commissions frequently find themselves juggling decisions that not only must accommodate design requirements but also economics and politics--i.e. their reluctance to demand "quality". Several of the case study communities are attempting to address the issue. Both Galveston and Telluride have down-zoned all or portions of their historic district(s) while citizens in Arrow Rock are debating the pros and cons of using the present sewer system as the means by which to limit new development. In all three instances, the decisions have had or will have a direct impact on the volume and design of new construction in those historic districts.

Developing a Network of Information

The review process has been around long enough to understand how it should work and commissions across the country are eager to exchange information. As a result, the last ten years have seen the establishment of a network of organizations including the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions and statewide groups such as the Georgia Alliance of Preservation Commissions.

A relative newcomer to the local review process is the National Park Service through its Certified Local Government (CLG) program which is administered by the State Historic Preservation Offices. A community can become a CLG if it has a preservation ordinance and a local commission, and meets specified requirements. Once certified, a local government qualifies for several benefits including grant moneys that are available only to CLGs and technical assistance through training programs and publications for preservation commissions.

Several but not all of the nine case-study communities have opted to become CLGs even though all of them have historic districts that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Those that have chosen not to apply for CLG certification believe that the goals of the local commission and those of the state office are not necessarily the same and that state offices do not always understand local politics or the resources that are available on the local level. The design of infill buildings and

new additions to existing buildings is one area in which there frequently is a difference of opinion and philosophy between architectural preferences on the local level and the Standards for Rehabilitation that are applied on the state and Federal levels: the latter are not sympathetic to replicative design to the degree that most communities prefer for their historic districts and which is, quite frankly, the most satisfactory design solution that the majority of designers and architects can offer. Just how much of an issue this will become depends on how much the states become involved in local commission decisions other than those that require state review for tax benefits.

Whether they are a CLG or not, the commissions in all nine communities have been interested in refining their ability to analyze applications for new construction projects. For example, the Galveston Historical District Board has decided that simply having design guidelines does not provide the answer for all renovation and new construction projects and therefore, they need to know how to use them. The Alexandria Board of Architectural Review, which is writing design guidelines for the first time, is eager to encourage a variety of options for new design.

There are other indicators that new construction and the public review process in historic districts are entering a new phase. The private preservation organizations in Savannah and Indianapolis have conducted in-depth studies of vacant lots in the historic districts and their potential for development. The Mobile Historic Development Commission, a city agency, co-sponsored a design competition for an infill project in a historic district and is seeking a developer to build the winning scheme. In several districts, neighborhood groups are taking a more active role in new development in their area.

Design Review Raises Design Standards

The public design review process itself will remain a reactionary one, a fact which disturbs some people but which is inherent to the process. Preservation commissions can only react to designs that are submitted to them. Commissions and staff can participate in the preparation of surveys, plans, guidelines, and procedures but they cannot design the buildings: that is the responsibility of the property owners and their designers.

Getting good new buildings in historic districts depends, to a large extent, upon getting good designers which proves, some will argue (usually architects), that you cannot legislate good design. It is not quite that simple as I concluded once again when re-examining the nine communities. While the design review process remains one of the more controversial preservation and planning tools--just as it was in the mid-1970's--so the design of new buildings for the historic context remains one of the most difficult design issues. It is evident, however, that the preservation commissions and the public review process have raised the standards for new construction projects in the historic districts in each of the nine communities.

SUMMARY

THE IMPACT OF THE PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS ON NEW DESIGN IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS IN THE UNITED STATES Ellen Beasley

There are approximately 2000 locally designated historic districts in the United States. Local zoning ordinances are the legal means by which municipalities designate districts and appoint preservation commissions that review proposed alterations and demolitions to existing buildings and all new construction within district boundaries. Commissions usually consist of five to nine members with representatives from the preservation, design, legal, and real estate professions as well as property owners in the district(s).

New construction is the most difficult issue for commissions to review, a conclusion that I made after I conducted a study of new construction in the residential historic districts of nine American communities in 1977-78. Currently, I am completing a re-examination of the same communities to document the evolution of the public design review process and how it and/or other factors have influenced new design over a period of time. The communities that served as case studies are: Alexandria, Virginia; Arrow Rock, Missouri; Beaufort, South Carolina; Galveston, Texas; Indianapolis, Indiana; Mobile, Alabama; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Savannah, Georgia; and Telluride, Colorado.

Although the review process still has its controversial aspects--and always will--the commissions have become more comfortable with their decisions including those relating to new construction projects. This reflects greater public support as well as a strengthening of procedural and planning tools such as design guidelines. The most difficult issues now confronting the commissions are use-related, especially in districts where the balance has shifted from residential use to commercial, office or mixed-use or where uses have shifted to tourist services.

In the 1970's, everyone was groping for a consensus of what was "appropriate" infill architecture for historic districts. The general public clearly preferred historic styles while professionals favored "contemporary statements." The gap has narrowed which reflects the impact of the American Bicentennial celebration in 1976, the swelling of the preservation movement, and the popularity of the Post-Modern style.

There has been a corresponding acceptance by the public of the review process in historic districts. The number of commissions has grown from 500 to 1200 since the mid-1970's. Since I did the original study, design review has been expanded in all nine communities that served as case studies: the original districts were enlarged or the number of districts was increased or both. Although I concluded that the process has had a positive impact on the communities, it is even more revealing that the communities themselves obviously believe that to be the case.

SUMMARY

INFLUENCE DES PROCEDURES DE REVUE PUBLIQUE SUR LE NOUVEAU DESIGN DES QUARTIERS HISTORIQUES AUX ETATS UNIS Ellen Beasley

Il y a environ 2000 quartiers classés historiques aux Etats Unis. Pour désigner ces quartiers, les municipalités disposent de moyens légaux que sont les arrêtés locaux de réservation de zone. Et elles nomment les commissions de préservation qui examinent les propositions de travaux et de demolition sur les édifices déjà existant ainsi que sur toute nouvelle construction dans les limites du quartier. Ces commissions sont constituées habituellement de 5 à 9 membres, avec des professionnels de la préservation, des architectes, des hommes de loi, des agents immobiliers, ainsi que des propriétaires.

La nouvelle construction est le sujet le plus difficile pour ces commissions, conclusion à laquelle j'ai aboutie apres en avoir realisée l'étude dans les quartiers historiques et résidentiels de 9 cités américaines en 77-78. Actuellement, j'achève de réexaminer ces mêmes cités pour montrer l'évolution du processus de revue publique du design et comment il a influencé, avec ou sans autre facteur, la nouvelle conception pendant une période donnée. Les cités étudiées sont: Alexandria, Virginia; Arrow Rock, Missouri; Beaufort, South Carolina; Galveston, Texas; Indianapolis, Indiana; Mobile, Alabama; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Savannah, Georgia; et Telluride, Colorado.

Bien que le processus de revue garde, et gardera toujours ses controverses, ces commissions sont à present plus à même de prendre leurs décisions, et parmi celles-ci, celles concernant les projets de nouvelles constructions. Ceci reflète un plus grand intérêt du public ainsi qu'une amélioration des procédures et mesures de planification, comme les lignes directrices du design. Les questions actuellement les plus difficiles concernent l'utilisation, spécialement dans les quartiers où l'usage, de résidentiel, s'est déplacé vers le commercial, ou touristique.

Dans les années 70, chacun cherchait à s'accorder sur ce qu'était l'architecture "appropriée" pour les quartiers historiques. Le public préferrait clairement le style historique, tandis que les professionnels étaient en faveur du contemporain. Le fossé s'est rétréci entre les deux, ce qui reflète l'influence du Bicentenaire Americain en 1976, l'ampleur du mouvement de conservation, et la popularité du style Post-modern.

Il y eu une acceptation plus large des mesures de revue publique dans les quartiers historiques. Le nombre des commissions s'est accru de 500 à 1200 depuis le milieu des années 70. Depuis ma première enquête, la revue du design s'est élargie dans les toutes les 9 cités de cette étude: les quartiers initiaux se sont agrandis, ou le nombre de ces quartiers a augmenté, voire les deux. Bien que la revue du design a eu un positif impact sur ces cités, il est encore plus révélateur que ces cités elles-mêmes le reconnaissent.