

BERO ARCHITECTURE PLLC

ARCHITECTURE SUSTAINABILITY PRESERVATION

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ROCHESTER PRESERVATION BOARD

WHO AND WHAT

The Rochester Preservation Board reviews proposals for all non-maintenance exterior work on properties located within preservation districts and on City landmarks. The board consists of seven Rochester residents who volunteer their time to protect the integrity of historic neighborhoods.

WHY

Landmark designations and Preservation Districts were created because people like their neighborhoods and do not want to see them changed by uncontrolled outside forces. Major examples of such forces include highway construction and demolition of fine old buildings, but one of the most insidious forces for change is gradual replacement of portions of historic buildings based on convenience and conventional wisdom. (Conventional wisdom is often created by advertising; true wisdom is created by knowledge and experience.) These strong forces require strong countermeasures. Historic review boards are one such countermeasure. Economically, this has probably proven to be wise; if you live in a preservation district, your property value may be higher than comparable properties in surrounding areas.

WHEN

When your neighbor wants to permanently change a visible aspect of his property you will have to look at it. Whether or not you like the change, it will have an impact on enjoyment, and probably value, of your property. If you live in a preservation district your neighbor will be required to get approval for permanent changes before they can be legally made. Approval comes from the Rochester Preservation Board in the form of a "Certificate of Appropriateness."

HOW

If you are contemplating any visible change to a property in a Preservation District or to a City Landmark, call the City staff member assigned to the Preservation Board at 428-7238 and ask questions. Confirm your property is in a Preservation District or is a City Landmark. Is the proposed change regulated? What has been the recent history of the Board in dealing with similar changes? What is the schedule for Preservation Board hearings? What is the application deadline for a hearing you wish to attend? What documentation is required in order to apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness (C of A)?

DIFFICULTIES IN DEALING WITH THE BOARD

The Board generally meets once per month. C of A applications must usually be submitted 4 or 5 weeks before a hearing date so the process takes at least a month to complete. Because the Board may require that your proposal be modified and resubmitted, you may have to return for a second (or third) hearing.

You cannot predict the outcome of an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness. Since the Board consists of seven members, no single person speaks for it. Any advice you get before your hearing is speculative. Although the Board tries to be consistent, results may depend on which Board members attend the hearing, on where your request is on the evening's agenda, on the completeness of your application, on neighborhood approval or opposition. This is a messy process but it's all we have to protect us against our neighbors' lack of knowledge, bad choice of advisors, and taste.

BERO ARCHITECTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Learn about your building. To the extent you understand, appreciate, and respect its original design, the Board is apt to be sympathetic with your proposal.

Minimize visible changes. Don't make changes simply because you would like to modernize your building. New is not synonymous with better. The Board is wary of transient fads and short-lived materials.

Attend a Preservation Board hearing before applying for a Certificate of Appropriateness. The hearings are open to the public and you will learn a lot about the Board's concerns just by listening to an evening's proceedings.

Ask for the Board's help. The Board has a lot of experience in reviewing applications for certificates of Appropriateness, you don't. You can approach the Board assuming it is an adversary trying to stop you from making changes. Or you can treat the Board as a neighborhood protector and unpaid consultant who will guide you in a direction they are able to approve. If you are making a simple change that City staff feels the Board is apt to approve, go ahead and make your application. But if there is any question of the acceptability of your request, ask for an informal hearing (in Rochester, called a "referral") at which you can ask the Board's advice. Ask Board members' advice before you decide exactly what you want to change. This will save them and you unnecessary expense, wasted time, and hurt feelings.

REFERENCES

Both the Landmark Society of Western New York and the City have web sites explaining the Preservation Board in more detail. Try:

<http://www.landmarksociety.org/section.html?id=1&uid=9>

<http://www.rochestercityliving.com/hb/pres1.asp/>