

Advocacy News

December 2021

Alterations to the exteriors of properties within each of Madison's five local historic districts must be approved by the Landmarks Commission before any changes to those structures are made. The goal of the application process is to gain a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) from the Commission for the necessary work. Sometimes, the property owner is oblivious to this requirement. I'm sure there are also some owners who are tempted to avoid the approval process altogether, hoping that the changes can be made under the radar. For the two applications to be discussed in this article, the owners followed the required procedure, yet only one of the two projects was granted a COA, while the other must go back to the drawing board.¹

1123 Williamson St.

This modest (approximately 23 feet square with a four-foot-wide projecting front vestibule) yet attractive one-story gable-front home sits across from the only remaining gas station on Willy Street. The buildings on either side are substantially larger. The property owner wanted to increase the living space by using at least a portion of the attic by means of adding a 12-foot-wide dormer facing the neighboring grey house.



1123 Williamson St. by Kurt Stege

The owner of the house contacted a contractor who was interested in performing the work and willing to create basic drawings and renderings. Those materials were

(Continued)

¹ You can easily (and quickly) watch the Landmarks Commission meeting on November 15, 2021, when these two applications were considered consecutively. The Williamson Street property begins at about the 3:30 mark of the 26-minute recording, while the discussion of the Spaight Street property begins at about the 14:45 mark and runs less than five minutes. [Recording of Commission meeting.](#)

submitted to the Commission as part of the [application](#).

The Madison Ordinance governing changes to structures within historic buildings is currently being revised, but [the existing ordinance covering the Third Lake Ridge Historic District](#) includes a specific provision relating to alterations to roofs:

(d) Alterations of the roof of any existing structure shall retain its existing historical appearance. Sec. 41.23(9), MGO.

Madison's Preservation Planner², who is assigned as staff to the Landmarks Commission, reviewed the application prior to its consideration by the Commission and prepared a report explaining that the structure at 1123 Williamson St. had always been a one-story, so its "existing historical appearance" would be dramatically altered by placing a 12-foot-wide dormer on one side of the roof. It was explained that Landmarks Commission practice has been to permit dormers to be added to one or both sides of such a building if the dormer is only 4 feet in width and set back significantly from the gable end. Those types of dormers were not unusual to the original design of period-appropriate structures while much wider dormers set close to the gable end would be inconsistent with period-appropriate design.

It was obvious from his comments at the meeting that the contractor who prepared the drawings was merely following the directive of his potential client. The Commission quickly adopted the Preservation Planner's recommendation, rejecting the application as submitted. This was accomplished by adopting a motion to "refer" the matter to a subsequent meeting of the Commission. Referral provides the applicant an opportunity to submit a revised application that reflects a smaller dormer in a different position or an addition at the rear of the building.

1245 Spaight St.

In contrast to the previous example, this application sought to turn back the clock and recreate some of the balance and character of the building's original design.

The house was built in 1890 in a Gable-Ell form.³ Both the railing above the front porch and the porch itself stand out as later and inconsistent modifications to the original design. It isn't clear when these changes were made, but the decision to enclose the porch probably had the positive consequences of keeping the front entry to the home a bit warmer in winter and of escaping some mosquitos in the summer. Nevertheless, the changes made over time had done nothing to enhance the impression made by the

(Continued)

² Heather Bailey fills this position.

³ I only know this term because of the Trust's effort to preserve the masonry Gable-Ell at 216 South Hamilton Street and, more specifically, to the use of the term by Jason Tish in his [report](#) on that building in support of the Trust's advocacy efforts.

home on those who passed by on either the sidewalk or the street. The porch also had developed structural damage. There is a good chance that enclosing the porch had contributed.

While retaining an architect who is quite familiar with a neighborhood will not ensure a good design, it will usually generate a more thoroughly considered, pleasing, and appropriate result. The architect employed by these owners has decades of experience in and around the historic district and with the Landmarks Commission and the [application](#) reflected that knowledge.

Once again, the application seeking to make significant changes to the exterior of a home in the Third Lake Historic District had to be assessed in light of the relevant standards. As provided in s. 41.23(9), MGO:



1245 Spaight St. by Kurt Stege

- (a) Any exterior alterations on parcels zoned residential use that are located within two hundred (200) feet of other historic resources shall be visually compatible with those historic resources in the following ways:

...

- 3. Rhythm of mass and spaces.

- (b) Alterations of the street façade(s) of any existing structure shall retain the original or existing historical proportion and rhythm of solids to voids.

- (c) Alterations of the street façade(s) of any existing structure shall retain the original or existing historical materials.

...

- (e) Alterations of the street façade(s) of any existing structure shall retain the original or existing historical proportional relationships of door sizes to window sizes.

Once again, the Preservation Planner reviewed the application and prepared a report in advance of the Commission’s meeting. She also made a presentation at the meeting pointing out how removing the compromised enclosed front porch would expose the original front door and first floor windows that had been concealed to passers-by. She explained how the architect’s proposed design was historically compatible with the

(Continued)

original design for the porch, how the elimination of the enclosed aspect of the porch would return the home to its historic rhythm of masses and spaces (solids and voids), how the changes would be formed out of historically appropriate materials, and how the new railing above the porch would become consistent with other historic resources within 200 feet.

With no questions and no discussion, the Commission unanimously granted a Certificate of Appropriateness for the work described in the local architect's plans.

* * *

The following conclusions might be drawn from these two examples:

1. Staff plays an important role in reviewing an application.
2. Past practices of the Landmarks Commission may not be readily apparent from the language of the applicable ordinance but can be explained by the Preservation Planner.
3. An architect who is familiar with the neighborhood and the COA procedure and standards brings a lot to the table.
4. Success is more likely if the owner is willing to be flexible.
5. Success is more likely if the applicant is trying to return to a building's original design rather than to substantially modify that design.

You may wish to check out 1123 Williamson St. and 1245 Spaight St. in eight months or so to see if you are satisfied with any changes that may have occurred.