NEW BUILDINGS IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

The design of new buildings for historic districts is a complex and long-debated problem. Historic districts are rarely "frozen" places; periodic changes are inevitable and anticipated. The main concern is that new buildings relate, in terms of massing or scale, height, setback, and materials to the majority of existing historic buildings and, especially, to buildings on adjacent sites.

New buildings should respect the character and overall qualities of older buildings in historic districts.

Height

New buildings must conform with current Virgin Islands code regulations for maximum heights in specific zoning areas. In addition, new buildings in historic districts should conform with heights of surrounding structures, and not stand out as significantly higher (or lower). Steps should be taken to relate divisions marking stories to those of adjacent buildings. Windows, string courses (decorative molding), and cornices should be designed to match adjacent examples. If additional stories are necessary, various means of "masking" the difference should be explored, such as two stories sharing common window openings, or setbacks for upper stories. In some instances, higher stories should be relegated to the rear of lots to avoid changes in elevation along principal streets.

Consider relegating additional stories to the rear of lots in order to preserve uniform streetscapes.

Additional stories can sometimes be "compressed" into conformity with existing elevations. This hypothetical building (based on a now demolished earlier structure) compresses five stories into a height only slightly greater than the 2-story building adjacent to it.

New buildings should reflect the height, massing, and overall scale of surrounding buildings.

Elements, such as arcades, windows, heights, cornices, moldings, and the rhythm of openings should all be used to integrate the historic buildings into the existing context.

Respect the existing massing, scale, and orientation of existing buildings.
Massing/Scale

New buildings should have comparable scale and massing to those around them. Enormous, bulky shapes are discouraged. Efforts should be made to break up the plane or facade or larger or longer buildings, in order that they might better relate to the size and scale of adjacent examples.

Setbacks

New buildings must respect the existing setbacks of historic structures. New buildings should not, for example, be recessed if adjacent buildings face directly on the lot line or provide an arcade. Similarly, new buildings should not extend beyond the line created by other buildings on the same street -- nor should they encroach on public rights-of-way.

Materials/Colors

New buildings should respect the materials and general "textural" qualities of nearby buildings. Smooth or scored stucco, wood siding, corrugated metal, and brick are all common materials in Virgin Islands historic districts. Historic colors are outlined in a separate guideline. For the sake of continuity, every effort should be made to ensure compatibility of materials as well as colors.

Design

The design of new buildings is probably the most complicated issue. Generally, it is recommended that new buildings respect the overall character of historic examples without directly copying details. Wall planes, roof form or roof angles, materials, ratios of wall surface to window and door openings, colors, etc. can all be used as starting points for new design. The simple use of arches, hipped roofs, or historic looking shutters alone is not enough to create a sense of continuity.

In some cases, particularly for modest buildings, more directly imitative designs can be more acceptable. Simple vernacular ("everyday") wood cottages and, especially, wood secondary buildings can often take their lead directly from historic examples. Detailing, however, should be kept plain, and "gingerbread" decoration especially should be avoided.

There is a considerable amount of philosophical basis for even larger new buildings more directly imitating historic examples as well. Reconstructions of known historic buildings is often justified. If newer buildings are intended to imitate older ones, documented recreations can be approved; other designs can be considered, as long as detailing, design, etc. closely conform with known historic examples. It should be re-emphasized that this practice is can be taken too far, but "historically-replicative" buildings will be considered by the commission. However, half-hearted or "inaccurate" replicative type buildings will not be accepted.
A "pared-down", modern building such as this can often complement many of the qualities of historic buildings without copying details. Such a solution should often be considered.

Hillside sites, as found in Virgin Islands historic districts, require special consideration.

New buildings on hillside should respect the traditional pattern of development and not "loom" too prominently over the district. These proposed buildings for Government Hill in Charlotte Amalie clearly follow historic precedent in their height, massing, and distribution.

Many parts of historic districts in the Virgin Islands now lack their historic density, as demonstrated by their drawing of the former Hill Street Urban Renewal Area in Frederiksted. New in-fill construction to fill the many gaps in the historic districts, is strongly encouraged by the Historic Preservation Commission.

Demolition

Demolition of documented historic buildings within historic districts is strongly discouraged by the Commission. In most instances, in fact, demolition is not approvable, unless a strong case can be made for the building’s poor physical condition or the impossibility of economic return. All plans for demolition must be accompanied by designs for proposed replacement buildings or other proposals. If demolition occurs, the building must be documented by drawings and photographs prior to the demolition.

Architects

Owners wishing to construct new buildings in historic districts are advised to hire trained architects for the preparation of their designs. Drawings and other details are a basic requirement for review.

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