

Surviving a Design Review

Whether you're in a historic district or an upscale development, the secrets of success are the same

BY ASA CHRISTIANA

When you buy into a neighborhood, you buy the neighborhood, and every resident has a stake in its quality of life. This means your rooster might make enemies, and your son's car probably shouldn't hit the cul de sac like it's an aircraft carrier. The presentation of the houses and landscape matters too, especially in developments where homeowners pay a premium for a certain look and feel, or in historic districts where residents, visitors, and businesses are counting on the character of the area.

In some of these developments and districts—whether you are building from the ground up, putting on an addition, or just changing a paint color—you will run into a design review board. Also called architectural review boards, or ARBs, these committees exist to enforce guidelines that go well beyond building codes and deed restrictions. Usually the focus is on appearance and style, but the directives often cover materials as well.

Whether you are the homeowner, architect, or builder, if you're not aware a review board exists or you don't find out exactly what it requires, you could waste thousands of dollars on architectural renderings and construction plans only to have to go back to the drawing board, with the review committee potentially feeling less than excited about seeing you for round two.

Here's the good news: While review boards and design directives vary widely, experienced designers will tell you that the path to success doesn't. If you treat the process with respect, you'll almost always find a satisfying compromise for all the stakeholders who call your neighborhood home.

Rules and boards vary

Residential architect Steve Baczek has extensive experience working in both historic districts and design-controlled developments around Boston and in the Southwest United States. According to Baczek, the guidelines for new developments vary in complexity, but they are strictly enforced by an ARB because the builder or remodeler can control so many of the variables. "The historic districts understand that we are dealing with existing conditions that we don't have a lot of control over," Baczek says. "On the other hand, ARBs set stringent

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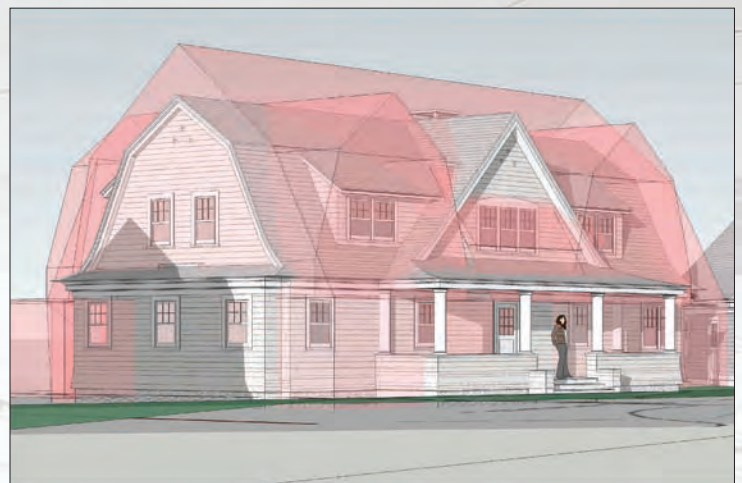
Connecticut architect Hope Proctor says it's important to help the review board visualize the style, scale, and siting of the proposed project.

Proctor was hired to design a new home in a historic district in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, that consists of mainly Shingle-style summer cottages dating as far back as the early 1800s. To maintain the integrity and characteristics of the architecture of the area, any structure built or renovated must receive approval from the Historic District Commission. The Commission considers many factors, including exterior windows, doors, light fixtures, and the location of utilities; exterior building materials; historic significance and architectural style; proportion, massing, and scale (including height and roof forms); and the siting of the home. Proctor was required to submit an application



for a Certificate of Appropriateness along with a proposed site plan, rendered exterior elevations, a scale model, and a narrative description of the proposed project.

Proctor also brought photographs of other homes in the neighborhood that used similar materials or details to show precedent. She provided material samples and documentation on materials being proposed that may not have been used previously in the neighborhood but would still fit in with the style. Lastly, and probably most importantly, she included several 3D computer images of the proposed house from various views, with the adjacent homes shaded in for context. She even overlaid the 3D footprint of one of the neighboring homes onto her design to show that the size and massing of the house would be appropriate (drawing right).



rules and the builder knows before buying the lot that he has to conform to them.”

In Mesa del Sol, outside Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Baczek guided a number of designs past the ARB, the design directives filled three binders, covering houses, landscaping, and streets and paths, with rules ranging from the minimum number of trees in the front yard to the five distinct allowable styles of houses. Baczek was required to submit complete building plans, elevations, and 3D models for approval. In the historic districts around Boston, Baczek reports, the guidelines are extensive but not as stringent.

“If I’m designing a remodel or addition for a house built in the 1850s, of course they [the ARB] want it to look like it was [part of the original design],” he says. “But there is room for compromise. For example, I know that windows are usually dear to their heart. So they might be willing to allow something else in the design that isn’t original, like a molding detail or a shingle color, in exchange for windows that look original. Or they might allow larger windows as long as they are refined, historic-looking models.”

In a historic district, boards are often municipal, staffed by volunteers. The best are representative of the stakeholders, with a balance between building and design professionals, business owners, and residents. Near Boston, Baczek says, there is a requirement that at least one committee member be a registered architect and another a registered landscape architect.

However, there are no guarantees. In some historic neighborhoods, like the old seaside colony of Fenwick, part of Old Saybrook, Connecticut, the design review board is made up entirely of residents, so the process is a bit more subjective. Architect Hope Proctor has worked hard to build trust on the board, arguing that it’s in the neighborhood’s interest to welcome new designers. If the homes begin to look too similar, Proctor observes, a charming borough like Fenwick starts looking “less historic and more like a new development.”

Still, Proctor appreciates the role the boards and guidelines play. In fact, she serves on a committee to develop a design review in nearby Essex, a nautical landmark with rows of original 1700s and 1800s shipbuilder’s and captain’s houses and a charming main street that draws thousands of visitors each year. As the rules stand, someone could build a vinyl-sided ranch downtown. “There is nothing to stop them but setbacks and height requirements,” Proctor says. “It could change the whole character of the town.”

For new communities, the design review is usually run by the developer until most of the initial building is complete. Then there is a provision for a homeowners association (HOA) to take over. If you’re lucky, the developer or HOA will hire an architectural firm to set the rules and do the review. Other times, the architectural review board is all residents, just as it is in some historic districts.

Know what’s required

The key to a good experience with a design review committee is respect. That starts with knowing the limitations on a property or structure before you buy it or consider remodeling it. “It’s your duty as a professional to ask: Are there boards or concerns related to this property?” Baczek says. An initial questionnaire he sends to each client mentions everything from historic districts to aquifers.

Whether you are working in a golf course community or Manhattan co-op, the information you need is almost always published and available. New York City architect Ananth Sampathkumar agrees. “My



A MATRIX FOR COMPROMISE

Massachusetts architect Steve Baczek approaches design review with an attitude of give-and-take and uses documents to make it easy for the board to understand the scope of the work.

Hoping for a smooth review process, Baczek prepared to compromise when presenting this 1720s Cape Cod remodel to the Wayland Historic District Commission. The work included removing previous additions and building a new addition maintaining the modest Greek Revival style.

Because the streets have changed since the house was first built, the home’s main entry is now on the side of the house. Baczek agreed to keep the entry location and the board agreed to allow him to build a new entry vestibule. Baczek agreed not only to maintain the exterior style, but also to precisely replicate the details, and the Commission



approved his request to use PVC trim for a low-maintenance exterior. Baczek agreed to keep the 6-over-6 window style and the Commission compromised by allowing him to install modern energy-efficient units.

Baczek credits part of his success with the Commission to his "exterior aesthetic matrix," which was among the first pages in his proposal (photo right). The matrix gave the commission a way to view the complete scope of the work at a glance. One member commented that Baczek's was the best proposal he had ever seen. Baczek did have to propose an addendum when his client requested a stone wall for the front yard, but a simple project narrative and a new front elevation was all the Commission needed to approve the change.

Exterior Aesthetic Matrix		
Category	Existing Conditions	Proposed Work / Remarks
Year Built	1720	n/a
House Type	Cape Cod	Maintain Cape Cod Type
House Style	Modest Greek Revival	Maintain Modest Greek Revival Style
Number of Stories	1 1/2	Maintain 1 1/2 story aesthetic
House Foundation	Stone Foundation	Cast concrete foundation at new work
Basement Windows	Wood Frame Single Glazed 3 Lite Vertical Cut Dark Grey/Black in color	Wood Frame Insulated Glass Similar 3 Lite Vertical Cut Similar Grey/Black in color
House Structure	Wood Frame	New work to be 2x6 wood frame / maintain existing at remodeled portion
Siding	Wood Lap Siding 4 1/2" TTW Wood Shingle Siding 5" TTW	New wood lap siding 4" TTW (Location per elevations) New wood shingle siding 5" TTW (Location per elevations)
Exterior Finish Color	White in color	Maintain White Color
Exterior Trim Color	White in color	Maintain White Color
Windows	Double Hung Wood sash and frame Single Glazed 6 over 6 Lite Cut White in color Mulin Bar width 3/4"	Marvin Wood Double Hung Wood Sash and Frame Double Glazed Low-E with Simulated Divided Lites 6 over 6 Lite Cut White in color Mulin Bar Width 5/8" (see window section details)
Gutter / Fascia	No Existing Gutters 1x Fascia ~ 6" Roof Overhang Unvented Soffit Assembly	New Wood Gutters at roof eave locations / metal downspouts Maintain Fascia profile - exception at locations of new gutters Maintain existing roof overhang Maintain unvented soffit assembly
Roof	Asphalt Shingle Unvented Ridge	Maintain Asphalt Shingle material Maintain Unvented Ridge

main tip is due diligence,” he says. “The information is there, so do your homework.”

An online investigation will tell you how extensive the guidelines are, precisely what they require, and what materials need to be submitted for approval.

“The number one thing that trips people up is that they don’t understand what the guidelines are after or what they are asking for,” says Richard Taylor, who designs high-end residential homes in Ohio and Arizona. “Read carefully, ask questions, and hire a designer or architect who can translate the guidelines into something achievable.”

In any board’s published directives and guidelines, you’ll also find submission requirements that can range from a photo and rough sketch to complete construction drawings and design models. Typical submissions for new construction, additions, and extensive remodels include photos of the existing property, drawings of the design, and additional info about materials, dimensions, placement, and more.

Have a concept meeting

While reading the rules and guidelines is half the battle, there is an equally critical step that many people miss: an early, informal meeting with the board. “Meet with committee members with the general idea,” says Walter Zeier, who heads the ARB for Muirfield Association, the large HOA at Muirfield Village, a prestigious golf course community in Ohio. “Let them know that you want it to look good and that you want to work with them.”

In a casual meeting, while ideas are still general, it’s easy to gauge what matters most to a board and find solutions. “Come in with a concept,” says Taylor, who has worked on both sides of ARBs. “The main mistake that most people make is going too far with the design before they expose it to review. As soon as you have the essential elements, ask for some form of preliminary concept review.”

For that first meeting, Taylor recommends bringing rough, scaled drawings that describe the basic form of the project—its size, shape, and location—“enough to describe the overall look and feel but not enough that we can’t throw it away and start over again,” he says.

At Muirfield, Zeier says that he and his fellow board members, one builder and one architect, began offering free design consultations for HOA members. “They don’t have to take advantage of the service, but it’s amazing how much money we can save them.” The three board members now do hundreds of consults a year.

Although boards are usually fair and helpful, you don’t have to take no for an answer. “Pick your battles,” says Sampathkumar, who works in New York City where the gatekeepers go by different names but act much like ARBs. In one historic building, the brick had been mixed and matched over time and the clients wanted to homogenize the look. “The Landmarks Preservation Commission said to leave it as is, making it clear we would face opposition if we changed it. So we listened.”

On the other hand, on a gut remodel of a 1920s co-op, Sampathkumar pushed back and won. The client wanted to expand the bathrooms, an expansion of “wet areas” that co-op boards generally resist. “The board said it hadn’t been done before, but my firm found records that another apartment in the building had done similar work just a few years back.” As tough as a design review can be, this experience illustrates the key takeaways: Do your research, know what you’re up against, and when it matters most, don’t give up. □

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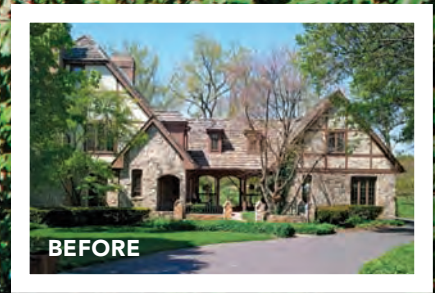


A STRATEGY OF ALTERNATIVES

Ohio architect Richard Taylor likes to give the review committee options, including them in the design decisions for an outcome that makes everyone happy.

Located in Dublin, Ohio, Muirfield Village is a planned community that revolves around two golf courses, the vision and work of golf legend Jack Nicklaus. Muirfield’s Design Control Committee is authorized by the Muirfield Village Declaration to review and pass judgement on all exterior design for both new homes and remodels.

Taylor recently brought this remodel in front of the committee. The family needed more garage space, so Taylor reoriented the entry to the garage and added a new garage bay. It wasn’t a big addition, but because there wasn’t enough room on site to add a third side-loading



garage, the obstacle was getting the front-loading garage approved.

Taylor created two very similar sketches with alternate versions of the project to show the design review committee. Essentially, he showed version B as a smaller, less massive version of the addition, in case the committee was concerned with the size.

In the end, they weren't, and the committee ended up approving version A, but with the posts from version B instead of the brackets shown in version A. The idea was that the big posts and metal roof would play down the appearance of the doors.

Taylor's strategy of offering multiple options with somewhat interchangeable parts, along with presenting the limitations of the site and a commitment to enhancing the architecture of the house, was enough for the committee to approve the project.