

West Tisbury Historic District Commission

HISTORICAL CHARACTER AND DESIGN GUIDELINES: What is meant by “appropriateness”?

HISTORICAL CHARACTER

In 1982, the voters of West Tisbury adopted the West Tisbury Historic District By-Law, which established a small historic district in the town center, consisting of 14 structures and historic sites. At the 1999 Annual Town Meeting, by 2/3rds vote, West Tisbury’s voters significantly enlarged the West Tisbury Historic District, to include significant portions of the roads leading in and out of the town center. A map depicting the boundaries of the District is available through the Building Inspector’s office at Town Hall, on the Town of West Tisbury website at www.westtisbury-ma.gov or at the West Tisbury Library.

Historic districts do not prevent changes from occurring, nor do they prevent new construction. The intent is to make changes and additions harmonious with the architectural character of the existing building and the neighborhood, and to prevent the intrusion of elements which might detract from the historic aesthetic values of the district. The purpose of the district is not to halt growth, but to allow for thoughtful consideration of change.

It is clear that what characterizes the Town is an essentially rural ambiance. What has primarily contributed to the Town’s distinctive atmosphere is the spatial patterns defined by woodland, farmland, and open areas, with clusters of relatively old public buildings and private dwellings bounded and enhanced by the spaces between them. West Tisbury’s historic character has thus been marked inescapably by the visible patterns of communal life to which all the buildings and sites contribute.

The primary responsibility of the WTHDC is to review applications and issue the appropriate certificates.

The WTHDC must issue a certificate before any external alterations can be made to any building, structure, or sign, as defined in the By-Law.

Applications are available at the Town Hall, from the office of the Building Inspector.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

Design guidelines are a set of guiding principles that the WTHDC uses to establish a basis for its decisions, and that applicants may use in formulating design solutions. Every building has architectural features that make it look the way it does. The size, shape, materials and color of each of these elements help to define the style of the particular building. Appropriate changes acknowledge and are sympathetic to the style of the original building and to the neighborhood in which the building is located. An appropriate addition would repeat or be responsive to a building’s architectural features.

Additions and New Construction

SIZE: The size and scale of a proposed addition in relation to that of existing and neighboring buildings will be evaluated. All changes should be done in a manner that preserves the existing scale and proportions of the structure.

MASSING: A proper addition is not overwhelming. Its height, width and depth (massing) are similar in scale to or smaller than the original structure. Additions should be subservient to the original structure, and should be located where least visible from the public view.

ROOF CONFIGURATION: Proposed additions should match or harmonize with the roof style and details of the existing building. Architectural features that give the roof character should be preserved. (see **Dormers**)

NEW CONSTRUCTION should blend in well to the surrounding neighborhood by using similar scale, materials and siting.

Architectural Elements

Architectural elements, such as doors, windows, porches, dormers, balconies, decorative details such as cornices, railings, and similar features that falsify or confuse the history of a building should be avoided. They play a key role in defining the style of a building and so deserve particular attention and respect.

Balconies and Roof Walks

Balconies and roof walks are generally inappropriate additions to existing structures. If balconies are proposed they should be located out of public view.

Barns

Barns should be preserved and maintained. Renovations that destroy the integrity of the structure as a barn (by making it look like a house) are discouraged.

Chimneys

Chimneys should be retained in most cases and repaired as necessary. Pipe extensions should be avoided. Red clay water struck brick with natural mortar is generally appropriate.

Decks

Decks should not be sited where they detract from the historic design of the structure. Appropriate vegetative screening should be considered.

Demolitions

Demolitions are seldom approved. The HDC will issue a demolition permit only if the structure to be demolished has no historic merit. Where a new building or structure will replace the old, approval for the new structure must be granted as a condition of demolishing the old. In addition the applicant must provide a timetable and guarantees for completion and replacement of the structure. Documentation of the building or structure to be demolished may be required through measured drawings and photographs.

Doors

Existing doors should be retained and repaired. New openings are discouraged. Altering the size of the existing door will generally not be allowed. Screen or storm doors should not mask the moldings, hardware, steps, glass and pediments of the existing door.

Dormers

Dormers should be small in scale, and facades visible from the public way should not appear as if an additional story has been added.

Driveways, Parking, Walkways, Mailboxes, Pools and other similar structures

Driveways

The most appropriate driveway pavement for a pre-1900 house is packed gravel. If asphalt is desired, it is appropriate that stone dust be rolled into the surface while hot to mitigate the “ink black” look. Many different surface treatments are available for asphalt to gain the appearance of gravel or peastone, and in general these are encouraged. Front yards should not be converted for parking cars which dominate the view of the structure from the public way. Removing trees to expand driveways or parking space is discouraged.

Parking

Providing off street parking may be a significant alteration to a property. Enlarging driveways results in reduced green space. Applicants are encouraged to carefully consider parking alternatives and design options. Designs should be discreet and conservative in the amount of open space converted to parking. Parked vehicles should not dominate the view of the structure from a public way or place. Parking should be to the side, or preferably, behind the building, and should not be excessive.

Walkways

Brick, stone, gravel or peastone are recommended. Asphalt is discouraged.

Mailboxes and Newspaper Tubes

Rural, roadside mailboxes on free-standing posts are generally discouraged by the HD Commission. Newspaper tubes are not permitted. If petitioned for special consideration by a homeowner, the HDC will review the request singularly. If exceptions are granted, all USPS regulations will apply. Novelty mailboxes will not be approved in the historic district.

Pools and other similar structures

Should not be visible from the public way.

Fencing

Traditionally, fences were located along the road in front of historic structures. These fences should be open and low (not exceeding 42”). They should complement the structure and not obstruct a view of it. Traditional materials should be used (wood, granite and stone). Vinyl fences are not appropriate.

Fences along a public street: in front of a building, fences should be open and low so as not to block the public view. Fences should be compatible with the existing building in material, proportion, style and historic period and should enhance the streetscape. Architecturally significant fences should be maintained and repaired or restored whenever possible.

Fences remote from public view: More solid taller fences are appropriate to provide privacy or safety but should be located where they have minimal visual impact from public streets, ways or places. They should be appropriate to the structure and the surrounding area. 5 feet is the recommended maximum height.

Wherever fences are located, care should be taken to modulate the length so as not to create a visual barrier. Landscaping should be considered in combination with fencing to relieve the visual impact of a long fence. Stockade fencing is not a characteristic of the historic district and is highly discouraged.

Foundations

New foundations should be in harmony with the foundation heights of buildings in the surrounding area, and should be consistent with the typical foundation height of the architectural

style of the house. Original masonry and mortar should be retained when possible without the application of any surface treatment. Foundations should be repaired or extended with the materials of the existing foundation.

Grading and Site Work

The existing natural contours and topography of the landscape should be preserved to the fullest extent possible. Natural features such as large trees, watercourses, scenic or historic spots and similar community assets should be preserved.

Gutters and Downspouts

Gutters should be of wood or copper, and in some cases painted aluminum. Unpainted aluminum is generally not appropriate for flashing, gutters and downspouts. Hung gutters should be as unobtrusive as possible. Downspouts should not obstruct the view of the structure's corner wall elements.

Landscaping

The Commission may require plant screening for approval of a feature, but in general does not have jurisdiction over landscaping, with the exception of trees 30 feet or over, which may not be removed without HDC approval. The removal or alteration of any plantings which have been made a necessary condition to the granting of a certificate of appropriateness requires approval. Although the Commission does not have jurisdiction over landscaping, the Commission also does not consider landscaping to alter the meaning of "visible from a public way". When determining that a structure is not visible from the public way, the Commission assumes there are no natural landscaping features or fencing which could be easily removed blocking the view of the structure, causing the structure or a portion of the structure to be visible.

Lighting

All lighting fixture changes visible from a public way should be dark sky compliant and require a hearing. The intensity and distribution of light is taken into account. Preference is for a lamp (light bulb) to be fully shielded inside the fixture, so it is not visible from adjacent properties. Many historic-style fixtures can be easily altered to shield the lamp. Pole lights and spotlights are inappropriate and are highly discouraged.

Mailboxes and Newspaper Tubes

Rural, roadside mailboxes on free-standing posts are generally discouraged by the HD Commission. Newspaper tubes are not permitted. If petitioned for special consideration by a homeowner, the HDC will review the request singularly. If exceptions are granted, all USPS regulations will apply. Novelty mailboxes will not be approved in the historic district.

Materials

Traditional materials, including but not limited to wood, glass, brick and stone are the preferred building materials in the Historic District. These are the materials historically used in construction, and it is appropriate to use the same materials when building, renovating, or expanding. Synthetic materials are generally not appropriate. As new materials are developed that are indistinguishable from natural traditional products the Commission will consider their use on a case by case basis.

Modern Equipment

Modern equipment, such as an external air conditioner or an electrical generator, larger electric meter boxes, HVAC systems, propane tanks, dumpsters, alarm systems, antennas, and associated mounting devices should be as small and inconspicuous as possible. Modern equipment should be sited in the rear of the building whenever possible and may require screening by vegetation, walls or fencing. Modern equipment should be painted to blend with the building and surroundings. Flues and vents should be concealed by chimneys or cupolas. Vents should be painted to match the surface they are on. Front yard locations facing the public way are not appropriate and are discouraged.

Outbuildings

Visually filling the lot from side to side with house and outbuildings detracts from the landscape component of the historic streetscape and is not appropriate. The Commission will consider size, scale and placement of the outbuilding itself, as well as its relation to the lot size and other structures on the lot and nearby lots.

Painting

You may repaint your house its current color, or white. White does not include off-white. For any other color a certificate is necessary.

Porches, Porticos, Steps and Railings

Original porches that contribute to the historic appearance of the structure should be retained. New porches, porticos, steps and railings should be consistent with the period and style of the building.

Shutters

Shutters should be wood, and reflect their original use. They should appear to be operable, slats should point up when shutters are open, and shutters should cover the entire window when closed.

Siding

Cedar shingles or white clapboard are appropriate. Vinyl siding is not.

Signs

The Commission reviews temporary structures or signs, except those meeting conditions of duration or use and similar matters as the Commission shall specify. The Commission allows signs, in connection with the non-residential use of each building or structure, consisting of letters painted on wood without symbol or trademark, and if illuminated, illuminated only indirectly with a steady light, and which comply with the Town statute as to number and size. (The Town statute is more restrictive than the WTHD By-Law. Please check with the Building Inspector for those requirements.) All other signs require review. Variety and creativity are appreciated. Synthetic signs are generally not appropriate. The applicant should note existing signs in the vicinity.

Skylights

Skylights require approval, and are unlikely to be permitted on an elevation facing the street, or visible from the public way.

Solar Panels

Avoid installations on the front/primary roof faces; avoid damage to historic roof material such as slate or tile; the panels and mounting assemblies should be unobtrusive (“matte black” panels, and dark/not shiny mounting assemblies); installations should be parallel to the roof surface and as close to the roof surface as possible; configurations should be symmetrical (no patchwork of panels); visible conduits should be painted to match the surfaces where they are installed; meters, shut of switches, equipment boxes should be located where they are not visible or are minimally visible.

Windows

Existing windows should be repaired not replaced, wherever possible. Replacement windows should be all wood, and of the same dimensions for muntin and frame, same design, and same number of panes as the original or existing window. For new construction, windows should be wood, true divided light. Single-pane, historically accurate, true divided light windows are the most appropriate, but simulated divided light windows may be considered depending on age, significance and prominence of the structure. On new windows and doors simulated true divided light with factory installed mullions and muntins, no wider than 7/8” wide, shall be used. Windows with snap-in or removable muntins not supporting glass will not be approved. Vinyl clad windows are inappropriate. Aluminum clad will be considered on a case by case basis. The number of lights within a window should be consistent with the original units or with the number of lights historically used in the period. Existing stained glass should be retained and repaired. The style of window should be consistent with the architectural style of the building. Casement windows are not appropriate on historic buildings. Unity and harmony are usually achieved when the same window style and scale are used consistently on all facades.

The WTHDC holds most meetings and all hearings, unless otherwise posted, on Monday evenings, at 5:30 at the Howes House, and generally does not meet on State or Federal holidays which fall on a Monday. We encourage applicants to come in and discuss their project before submitting a formal application. Please call the Chair, Sean Conley, to be put on our meeting agenda.

If you have any questions, please contact Sean Conley, Chair of the WTHDC.

Telephone: 508-693-6677

Email: nautilus@vineyard.net

Address: West Tisbury Historic District Commission, Town Hall, PO Box 278, West Tisbury MA 02575.

Thank you.

West Tisbury Historic District Commission

Sean Conley, Chair

Meg Carman

Nancy Dole

Anne Fisher

Charles Kernick

Josh Gothard

Sheila Morse

Carol Sarason

