

Lauer, Martha

From: Matthew Brown <askmisterbrown@yahoo.com>
Sent: Monday, September 29, 2014 1:16 PM
To: Lauer, Martha; Tully, Tania
Subject: Submission re Guidelines
Attachments: Comments re guidelines 9-14.doc

Dear Martha and Tania,

Thank you for hosting a very interesting forum last week.

I see that you are accepting and posting comments from individual citizens. Thank you very much for doing so, and thank you for all your diligence in accepting the input of the community.

Attached are my comments. They do not ask for specific language revisions, but present an overarching principle that I feel is important.

Best wishes,
Matthew Brown

To: Raleigh Historic Development Commission
From: Matthew Brown
Re: Revisions to the RHDC Design Guidelines
September 29, 2014

Thank you for your diligence in receiving the input of Raleigh citizens regarding the revisions in progress to the RHDC's Design Guidelines. I am the Historian for the Society for the Preservation of Historic Oakwood. I am also a former member of the RHDC. I have done extensive research on the history and architecture of every house in the Oakwood historic district, and have nearly completed the draft of Oakwood's inventory for the National Register of Historic Places.

Oakwood is the only surviving 19th- and early 20th-Century neighborhood in Raleigh. That is what defines its character. That is what makes it special – especially considering that many cities such as Charlotte and Durham have NO surviving 19th-Century neighborhoods – just a few scattered remnants.

Oakwood's historic architecture gives it a unique and beautiful aesthetic, and a wonderful feeling of stepping back into our history, which is treasured by residents, visitors, and students of history and architecture.

In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, Oakwood's "period of significance," aesthetics reigned supreme. Therefore, to introduce buildings into Oakwood that are antagonistic to its aesthetic would be to damage the character of the district.

I personally love the architecture of the first Modernist period, and also the current revival thereof. But a building in a strongly Modernist style would be aesthetically incompatible with the architecture of Oakwood. Buildings of the current Modernist Revival are stark, unadorned, of horizontal emphasis, with flat or low-pitched roofs, of high-tech appearance, and built of newly-developed materials. Oakwood's architecture, in all its variety of styles, is mellow, richly ornamented, of vertical emphasis, with vertical windows and steeply-pitched roofs, and built of natural materials. These are aesthetic opposites!

They were MEANT to be aesthetic opposites. Modernism was not just the next style in a series of styles. It was a PHILOSOPHY which preached a strong REJECTION of all previous styles. The Modernists said that the past must be cleared away. Le Corbusier, the visionary leader of the Modernist movement, developed a plan to demolish two square miles in the center of Paris and replace it with modern buildings. Although this was never carried out, copycat plans were carried out in cities across America. In Raleigh, The "State Capital Plan," adopted in 1965, called for 157 acres north of the Capitol – full of beautiful historic architecture -- to be flattened and replaced by modern buildings. The 157 acres included most of Oakwood. The lead architect of the State Capital Plan was the leading Modernist Harwell Hamilton Harris, a professor at the NC State School of Design.

Most of the 157 acres were indeed demolished, but by the time the bulldozers reached Oakwood in the early 1970s, the Modernist movement was fading, and the Preservation movement was rising. And yes, those were opposing forces at the time. The residents of Oakwood fought tenaciously to resist demolition until 1975, when that part of the “State Capital Plan” was abandoned and Oakwood was made Raleigh’s first historic district. But not all of Oakwood survived. 37 historic houses on its western edge had already been demolished.

So Modernism and Oakwood are incompatible not only aesthetically but also philosophically and historically. This is not to say that either Modernism or Oakwood is “good” or “bad.” They are just not compatible. Chocolate is good; garlic is good; they are not compatible.

Some claim that Oakwood is diverse, so Modernism would fit in. But of the 509 principal structures in the Oakwood local historic district, there are no truly Modernist houses. There are three that were built during Raleigh’s Modernist period and have some typical characteristics. One has been altered beyond much recognition. Another is hardly recognizable as Modernist. Modernist architecture is not part of Oakwood’s diversity and would stand out as antagonistic to the character of the district.

The purpose of the Raleigh Historic Development Commission is not just to preserve individual buildings, but to preserve the CHARACTER of the historic districts. If not, why would we even have districts? Therefore the RHDC Guidelines need to protect Oakwood from buildings that would damage the character of the district by introducing buildings that are aesthetically, historically and philosophically antagonistic to its character.

Some say that new buildings in historic districts should be of a contemporary design. Contemporary simply means “of this time.” Any building designed today, in any style, is therefore contemporary. There are many houses being built across Raleigh today that would be aesthetically compatible with Oakwood. (And many more that would not be, of course!) There are only a few that would make the statement “Screw these old houses. Look at MEEEE!!”

Raleigh now has a land area of 148 square miles. Oakwood is one-eighth of one square mile. Is it too much to ask that the character of this tiny treasure be preserved for future generations to explore and appreciate?

The RHDC Guidelines should protect the historic districts from the vicissitudes of fashion. They should ensure the survival of the character of each district, even when the current fad is antagonistic to the character of the district. Indeed, they should do so ESPECIALLY when the current fad is antagonistic to the character of the district. We now look back with horror at all the “experts” in the 1950s and

1960s who preached the destruction or alteration of so many historic treasures.
Let not future generations look back at us with even a shred of the same horror!