



5 MISTAKES TO AVOID

When Building a New Home In a Historic Neighborhood

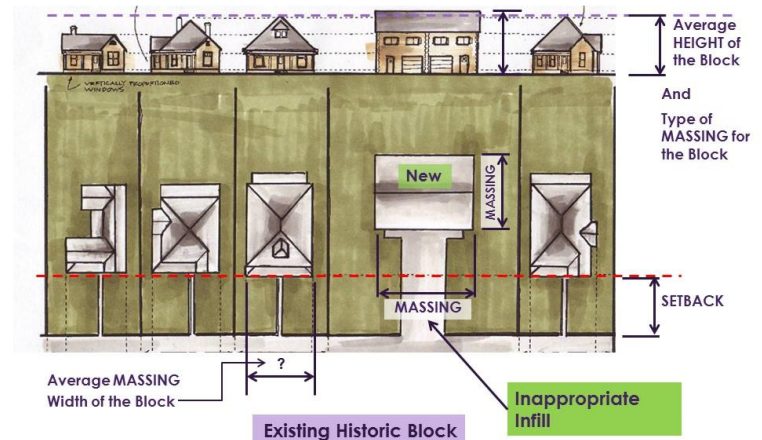
1 Buying a lot within an Historic Zoning Overlay without conducting research

If you are new to building in an historic neighborhood, chances are that all the houses probably look the same to you. The Historic Zoning Overlay regulations define what size of house you can build in an historic area. Before you buy a lot in an Historic Zoning Overlay, do some research and find out if you can build the house that you are planning in that area.

Questions to ask: Will you be able to build a true 2-story house on your lot? What will be your allowable maximum height and maximum width?

Keep in mind that if you are a spec builder trying to maximize your investment, or if you're paying top dollar for a building lot, your goal will probably be to build a larger house; 2 stories and 2,500 sq. ft. or bigger. If the lot you buy is located in a Historic Zoning area, you may only be allowed to build a much smaller house if the street (or block) on which your lot is located has only short 1 story or small 1 ½ story homes.

The Historic Zoning Agency will usually require new houses to fit within certain massing and height ranges to match the houses already built on the block or street. You can see the image below for an example of a new building that does not work in an historic area.



Evaluating The Block or Neighborhood

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Of course, if your lot isn't located in a Historic Zoning Overlay but is in an historic neighborhood, it is still wise to be a good neighbor and build a house that fits the general feel of the area. Building a large "McMansion" that stands out like a sore thumb is not a good way to make friends in an historic neighborhood!

Do your research before purchasing a lot; understand if the area is a good fit for your project plans, and if your planned build will be a good fit for the neighborhood.

NOTE: *If you buy an unusually size, shape, or small building lot, then you will probably have a hard time finding a stock house plan for it. This typically means you will spend more money on modifying a stock plan, which will require you to spend more money on design fees.*



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2 Finish floor elevation and grade issues

It is important not to start off on the wrong foot with the Historic Zoning Agency or your new neighborhood, and one way to ensure this is to pay attention to your planned finish floor elevation and grading, and how this will fit within the area.

The finish floor elevation is the height at which the building floor will sit above the earth. This figure is used as a reference point for all other aspects of the build including foundations, garages and driveways, and impacts the overall look of the house. The Historic Zoning Agency will tell you what measures are acceptable when you are

building in an Historic Zoning Overlay, and it is recommended to also pay attention to the adjacent houses' finish floor elevation to make sure your plans will fit well within the area.

What is acceptable in a non-overlay area? I recommend you build the finish floor of a new house no more than 12" - 16" above the adjacent houses.

You will also need to research any guidelines or restrictions that will impact the grading of your lot. Currently, Nashville (Davidson Co.) has guidelines about storm water management and finish grade. This means that lot owners must work with the existing grade and not recreate a new higher grade for a new house.

I have seen builds where the masonry subcontractor raised the existing grade by 3' to 4' to make the foundation footing code approved. This usually doesn't look good or fit into a neighborhood. A few of my builder clients have learned the hard way when construction was stopped and the Historic Zoning Agency made them remove one or two courses of block because the front of the house was being built too far out of the ground.



Above is a photo of a house that was built too far out of the ground.

The contractors had to remove two courses of block, and still the house appears too tall for the adjacent houses.



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#2 - Finish floor elevation and grade issues (cont.)

For those with building experience, you may already know that you have to watch your masonry subcontractor like a hawk throughout the build! I recommend you check on the masonry subcontractor every day. In my time as a designer, unfortunately I have seen more issues with masonry subcontractors than any others. Planning your finish floor and grade before turning the footing and masonry subcontractors loose on the jobsite can help ensure that your building will fit any History Overlay codes and sit well in the neighborhood.



If your lot slopes down from the rear of the lot to the front, like in this picture, you may need to remove more dirt and/or build a retaining wall.

Below is a list of items that can soften all the exposed block on the front of the house when working with sloped lots or the rear of lot is higher than the front sidewalk.

- Dig out part of the back or rear grade 16" to 24" and build a house plan that has a stepped-up section in rear of home
- Build a retaining wall
- Raise grade in front no more than 16"
- Build sidewalks to house with one or more landings with two or three steps each so there is a softer transition
- Use color, hand railing, and lots of landscaping to soften transition

3 Order windows and doors that don't meet regulations or don't match historic neighborhood design

I made this mistake once when I was adding onto the historic house I owned back in the late 1990s.

Historically, brick molding was only used on brick houses, and windows and doors in lap siding houses had 2x4's installed around them. These days, however, brick molding around windows and doors in suburban neighborhoods is typical, but not for historic neighborhoods.

Historic Zoning Overlays typically do not allow brick molding around windows and doors on lap siding houses or non-masonry houses. You can instead use 2x4s, 5/4 boards or man-made trim boards such as James Hardie, but it is wise to first check with the Historic Zoning Agency staff. The typical width of the windows and door trip boards is 3½".

WARNING: Before you order the windows and doors, verify if the window material and the manufacturer is on the approved list from the Historic Zoning Agency. Sometimes, aluminum clad is allowed in historic districts, but never vinyl windows.



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#3 - Order windows and doors... (cont.)

Design note: If your lot is located in a non-Historic Zoning Overlay, and you plan on using vinyl windows, I recommend ordering the windows and doors without divided lites. You (or a future homeowner) can never paint the divided lites, because they are located in between the glass panes of the windows. The divided lite will always be white, even if it does not go with the color scheme of the house!

Currently, earthy or dark colors are in style for the exterior of houses. Since there aren't many color choices for vinyl windows beyond white or off-white, it is difficult to match these kinds of color tones to vinyl window lites. Check out one of my new house designs that has beautiful dark earth colors and white vinyl windows.

You cannot miss the white vinyl windows!



Here is an example below where the paint colors were planned to go with the white vinyl windows.



See the difference?

The first thing you see when you get out of your car is concrete block and steps, because these houses were built to high out of the ground.

Planning your exterior paint colors in advance will allow you to order appropriate windows for your new house build!

I do not like vinyl windows because of the environmental issues associated with the manufacturing of the windows. In addition, I do not like look of them, because the windows have 'less' sash material. However, I understand why builders use them.

My personal preference is aluminum clad windows.

"Few elements of a building contribute more to its architectural character than do the windows and window sashes."

— Ken Roginski, The Old House Guy



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4 Exterior man-made finish materials

Today we use many man-made materials on the exterior of houses, such as James Hardie or CertainTeed. With my house design decisions, I use the best of both; wood or man-made materials depending on the design look I am going for.

If you are building in an Historic Zoning Overlay, the Agency and review board will only allow smooth finish on man-made materials, rather than fake wood grain patterns. The exception may be stucco finish panels or sheets, which come in 4'x8' panels. Keep in mind if you install the fake grain pattern materials on the exterior of a new house, the Historic Zoning Agency can make you remove it, or cover it up.

For example, one of my contractors was building a new house in a Nashville historic neighborhood within the MHZC overlay, and the lumber yard company ignored my notes on the exterior elevation plan about requiring smooth 4'x8' sheets of Hardie panels. The lumber yard delivered 4'x8' panels of embossed wood grain to the job site. The builder didn't check what was delivered and the subcontractor installed the materials in the gable of a Tudor style house, which you can see in the above right image.



Soon after, I received an email from the MHZC staff letting me know we had a problem. The builder had to remove the material because the fake wood grain was not allowed in the historic district.

I have also heard of the Historic Zoning Agency making builders remove fake wood grain lap siding because it is not allowed in the Historic Overlays. It is always best to plan your materials in accordance with zoning requirements, and check the materials when they are delivered!

Design note: Many builders don't really think too much about the fake wood grain on fiber cement board. However, as a Residential Designer of houses for historic neighborhoods, I hate the look of it! Real wood siding does not have a wood grain pattern as suggested on the cement fiber siding or panels. I recommend a smooth finish, and so plan for it in my designs.



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5 Don't RUSH the process of selecting a house plan!

I am so amazed at builders and homeowners who rush the process of selecting a house plan, which they will be building for a profit. Selecting a house plan that enhances your client's life and the neighborhood is no easy task. It's more than a shelter; it's your reputation, livelihood and their sanctuary. It's important to do your due diligence!

Some items to consider:

- Poorly drawn construction drawings will led to incomplete bids from subcontractors.
- You do not want any unforeseen items during construction, because of selecting a Residential Designer with poor construction drawings. This will slow construction and led to cost overruns not to mention irritated sub's.
- Is the house plan a desirable floor plan? You want to sell the house quickly to maximum your profit, right?
- Selecting a great plan that can be built several times on different lots also increases your overall profit.

In conclusion, we understand you are taking all the risk on building. And we understand you have to make a profit to continue to be in business. We believe you can make a good profit on building new houses AND be a good neighbor.
It's a win-win for everyone!



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You're here.

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