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## Excellent New Guide for Historic Districts Infill

November 28th, 2011

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A new set of design principles for infill construction should be *mandatory* reading for every historic district commission and design review board across the U.S. The [groundbreaking new document](#) is from the [Historic Preservation League of Oregon \(HPLO\)](#) and is intended only for historic districts in the state of Oregon. However, the seven principles are relevant for *every* historic district in the country because they tackle head-on the plague of highly differentiated new design that threatens to undermine the character and historic context of so many older neighborhoods across the U.S.



**HISTORIC RECONSTRUCTION IS GOOD:** A recent renovation of the 1885 Freimann Building in the Skidmore Historic District of Portland, OR, involved removal of its 1960s remodeled front (top image) and total re-creation of the original façade's contours and details. Some preservation purists would call this "false history." But the new HPLO report shows that – more importantly – the historic reconstruction helps re-establish the overall special character of the district. Photos: Architectural Heritage Center, Portland, OR

Many design review boards today demand that new construction in historic districts be in Modernist or highly differentiated styles. To buttress their insistence on Modernism, boards cite the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards](#) – especially the dictate of Standard #9 that "the new work shall be differentiated from the old." Even though John Sandor of the National Park Service has pointed out that the [Secretary's Standards were not intended to govern rehabilitation in entire historic districts](#) – nonetheless, many preservation commissions have continued to insist that new infill construction be in highly contrasting styles to provide "differentiation."

With compelling logic and clarity, the new HPLO report refutes the notion that new infill should look radically different. With its seven clear principles, the HPLO document sweeps away previous misinterpretations of the Secretary's Standards and focuses on preserving a historic district's essential character as the primary goal. Principle #1 states emphatically: "*The District Is the Resource, Not Its Individual Parts.*" Supporting text goes on to declare that historic districts are significant as a *collective whole* and must be protected in their entirety.

To make sure there are no misunderstandings about how best to protect the character of a district, Principle # 4 ("Infill Will Be Compatible yet Distinct") tackles the issue of architectural style explicitly: "Within historic districts, compatibility is more important than differentiation." And if that isn't clear enough, the guideline further states: "*Style is discouraged from being the primary indicator of differentiation. Means of differentiation may include materials, mechanical systems, construction methods, and signage.*"

These sensible design principles from HPLO are the latest development in a decades-long uproar from many quarters about the devastating effects that misguided interpretations of the Secretary's Standards have had on historic neighborhoods. Steve Semes's pioneering book, [The Future of the Past](#), details the fallacies behind some interpretations of the Secretary's Standards. A recent roundtable organized by the editors of [Traditional Building](#) magazine further examined problems posed by architectural contrast. And a 2011 symposium organized by US/ICOMOS has proposed ways to promote [compatibility rather than contrast in historic contexts](#).

The HPLO guidelines represent a new milestone because now an official preservation organization has taken note of grassroots protests and has published clear historic district design principles that contradict much of daily practice in the U.S. The seven new guidelines emphasize – correctly, in my view – the over-arching importance of architectural compatibility in preserving the special character of historic districts. Three cheers for the Historic Preservation League of Oregon. Let's hope that SHPO offices and preservation groups in the other 49 states are encouraged to do likewise.

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Michael Rouchell

November 28th, 2011 at 21:52 | #1

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#4 should read: "Infill shall be compatible and may be distinct." (There should be the option of infill that is nearly indistinguishable if desired, but compatibility should always be mandatory.)





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