

# heights • forward

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF  
THE HOUSTON HEIGHTS  
HISTORIC DISTRICTS  
(EAST, WEST, SOUTH)  
DESIGN GUIDELINES PROJECT

Issue 1, January 2016



## Next Meeting

Thursday, January 14, 2016

5:30 a.m.–7:30 p.m.

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

1819 Heights Blvd., Houston, TX 77008



## In This Issue

Welcome to *heights forward*! Every month, we will bring you the latest information about the City of Houston's initiative to develop historic preservation design guidelines for the Houston Heights Historic District East, Houston Heights West, and Houston Heights South. Here's what you'll find in this issue:

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## Looking for more information?

Learn more about this project and sign up for email updates at:  
[http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/HistoricPres/  
Design-Guidelines-Heights.html](http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/HistoricPres/Design-Guidelines-Heights.html)



**PLANNING &  
DEVELOPMENT  
DEPARTMENT**



## Project News and Updates

The project kicked off with a flurry of activity this fall

In October 2015, Houston City Council adopted amendments to the city's historic preservation ordinance. One of those amendments requires that the City develop design guidelines for the three Houston Heights Historic Districts (East, West, and South) within 16 months.

On October 1, the City's Planning and Development Department kicked off the Heights Historic Districts design guidelines project to meet that goal. A single design guidelines document will be created to serve all three Houston Heights historic districts.

To get the project underway, the Planning Department brought Steph McDougal on board. Steph has been working with the City for several years as a consultant to create design guidelines for the Germantown, Starkweather, and High First Ward Historic Districts, as well as content for the Historic Preservation Web Manual. Since October, the Planning Department:

- ✿ Established a project website to share information with the public and make this process transparent.
- ✿ Held our first community meeting on December 8, 2015.

✿ Issued a Request For Proposals (RFP) for a qualified, experienced consulting firm to develop the Houston Heights design guidelines.

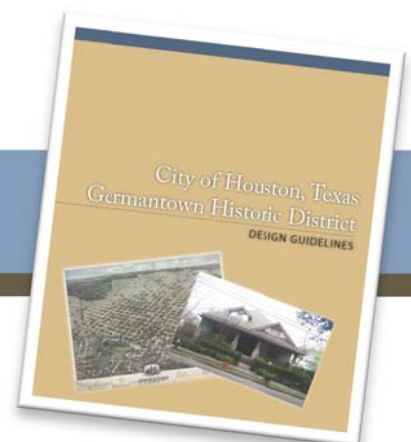
✿ Began to gather input from stakeholders in the Houston Heights historic districts.

✿ Mailed a letter to all property owners and started a media campaign to let everyone know how they can participate.

### Explain That Term: *Design Guidelines*

*Design guidelines* are a type of reference document that illustrates the City's historic preservation ordinance. The ordinance spells out the City's rules for how it manages historic preservation within its boundaries, including the kinds of changes that people can make to their historic properties while preserving those physical attributes that make the property historically or architecturally significant.

Houston currently has 22 historic districts, and the language in the ordinance must be broad enough to apply to all of those districts. Design guidelines are customized for a specific historic district, to help property owners in that district understand how the ordinance applies to *them*. Design guidelines provide a visual guide, with photographs and illustrations that show examples of what sorts of changes are appropriate or not appropriate for a particular historic district.



Once the design guidelines are adopted, property owners, their design professionals, City staff, and the historical commission will use them to determine whether proposed projects should or should not be approved.

# Spotlight on Architectural Styles

Each month, this column will focus on the architecture found in historic districts. In this issue: Learning to recognize *character-defining features*: the physical qualities common to a particular architectural style.



What's in? What's out? Just like in the world of fashion, styles and trends in architecture come and go. After a while, with the benefit of time and perspective, it is possible to identify large groups of buildings that look alike. Groups of similar buildings are described as being constructed in the same *architectural style*.

Some of the architectural styles that were popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s, such as the Craftsman style or Queen Anne style, are still found in Houston Heights today.

The physical qualities that make a building identifiable as belonging to a particular architectural style are called **character-defining features**.

Almost all elements of a building have an impact on its character, both individually and in combination with one another. That's why the City's historic preservation ordinance prioritizes repairing, rather than replacing, historic building materials and architectural elements.

The ordinance states that any proposed changes to a contributing

building in a historic district must, among other things:

- ✧ Retain and preserve the historical character of the property;
- ✧ Preserve the distinguishing qualities or character of the building; and
- ✧ Maintain or replicate distinctive stylistic exterior features or examples of skilled craftsmanship.

The shape of a building can be a character-defining feature itself, and it can also influence other features. For example, a Queen Anne house is likely to have a complex roof because the house itself is irregularly shaped.

Houses that include elements of more than one architectural style are sometimes called "transitional." The house below includes both Queen Anne and Craftsman features.



Windows, doors, siding, porches, and decorative trim also allow us to identify a house as belonging to a specific architectural style or period. In the photo below, the cutaway bay window, gingerbread trim, patterned shingles in the gable, and tall, narrow windows are all typical of a Queen Anne house.



Learning to identify these common qualities can make it easy to figure out a building's style, as well as which elements are historical and architecturally important. One excellent reference book is *A Field Guide to American Houses*, by Virginia McAlester, available at the Houston Public Library's Central Branch or at many bookstores.

# Development in Houston Heights

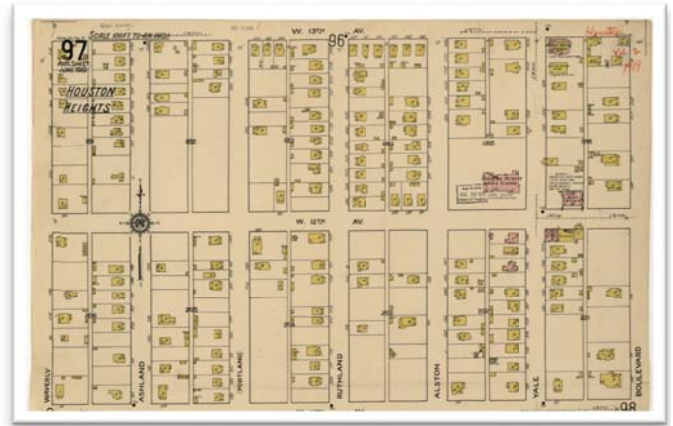
Houston Heights, founded in 1892, was Texas' first planned community and one of Houston's early suburbs. Houston Heights was laid out in a grid, with areas designated for homes, schools, and churches, as well as commercial and industrial development. The result was a self-contained community where people could live, work, and shop. It was also a convenient commute for workers in downtown Houston, thanks to the streetcars of the Houston Electric Railway, a company established by the founders of Houston Heights.

Lots were platted in a variety of sizes so that both wealthy and working-class people could afford to buy them. The typical residential block contained 24 lots, each 50 feet wide, with an alley providing common access to the rear of each lot. Residential lots were oriented so that most houses faced east or west, which helped to keep them cool in Houston's subtropical climate. Exceptions to this grid pattern were the areas west of Yale and north of 16th St, which had a north/south orientation. Corner lots and lots allocated for churches, schools, or important houses on or near Heights Boulevard, were often larger in size.

Houston Heights' original development included deed restrictions that controlled setback, use, quality, and size of construction in the city. This created a consistent look and feel throughout Houston Heights. After it was annexed to the City of Houston in 1918, the deed restrictions were no longer enforced, and properties began to change. Small houses were built in the spaces between large houses and some large homes were replaced by apartment buildings.

In 1985, the Texas Property Code was amended to allow cities or subdivisions to re-instate deed restrictions that had lapsed; Chapter 208 of the Code defines specific deed restriction procedures that apply only to Houston Heights. The Houston Heights Association (HHA) is responsible for managing deed restrictions within the community. Only some properties in the Heights are deed restricted today.

Even without deed restrictions, development in the Heights was limited by the City of Houston's wastewater system. The city's growth in the 1950s and 1960s outpaced the capacity of its sewage treatment facilities, and untreated wastewater was routinely dumped into waterways. In 1974, the State of Texas ordered Houston to clean up its act. In order to buy time to complete the massive amount of construction required to upgrade existing facilities and build new ones, the City imposed a moratorium on new sewer connection permits within the 610 loop. As a result, new construction in the Heights and other near-downtown neighborhoods was limited by hard-to-obtain sewer permits. This drove development outside the loop.



*This 1919 map, created by the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, shows the original configuration of blocks.*

Between 1950-1970, there was little investment and development in the Heights. The population declined as middle-class Anglo residents moved to the suburbs, and many homes were converted to rental property. The area became more ethnically diverse, with Hispanic and some African American residents. Although gentrification began in the 1970s, the recession of the 1980s resulted in a depressed real estate market throughout Houston well into the 1990s. As a result, the neighborhood's housing stock remained largely intact.

A new round of redevelopment and new construction began in the 1990s; high-end homes, built for mostly young, well-to-do Anglo residents, began to replace older, smaller houses. That trend has continued, mostly unabated, to the present day.

In 1995, the same year that the sewer moratorium was lifted, Houston's first historic preservation ordinance was adopted. This allowed the City to create historic districts and landmarks, but it would be 12 years before a historic district was designated in Houston Heights. Heights West became a historic district in 2007, with Heights East following in 2008 and Heights South in 2011.

Today, the Houston Heights Historic District design guidelines project provides property owners with the opportunity to have a say in development going forward.



## Did You Know?

The City of Houston receives between 300-400 applications for Certificates of Appropriateness (COA) every year.



Two-thirds of those come from the Houston Heights Historic Districts (East, South, or West).



Since 2010, more than 90% of COA applications have been approved, and to date in 2015, 90% have been approved at the first commission meeting.

# Houston's Preservation Ordinance

Houston's historic preservation ordinance has evolved over the past 20 years, through incremental changes that have strengthened protections for historic properties.

When Houston's first historic preservation ordinance was adopted in 1995, it allowed the City to designate historic landmarks and historic districts. Those designations provided recognition, but not protection. Property owners of landmarks and buildings within historic districts were required to apply to the City before changing, relocating, or demolishing the structure, but even if denied, the owner could proceed after 90 days had passed.

The historic preservation ordinance was amended in 2005 to create a Protected Landmark designation that conveyed with the property and eliminated the 90-day waiver for Protected Landmarks. (The 90-day waiver is still available for regular Landmarks.)

In 2010, additional amendments to the historic preservation ordinance eliminated the 90-day waiver for properties in historic districts as well.

The 2010 amendments also increased the required number of property owners in favor of creating a new historic district, from 51% to 67%.

Since the 2010 ordinance amendments strengthened the protections for properties within historic districts, the Planning Department implemented a process to potentially dissolve any historic district in which 51% of property owners supported dissolution. First, 10% of property owners had to sign petitions in support of dissolving the district, and all three of the Houston Heights historic districts met that requirement. The City then sent a survey to each property owner in each district, asking them to return it if they supported dissolution, with 51% support required to dissolve a district. The percentages of property owners who supported dissolution of a Heights historic district were 24.74%, 23.99%, and 26.26% for Heights East, South, and West respectively. As a result, all three districts remained.

In 2015, the ordinance was amended to clarify and correct some items and to streamline the approval process for certain changes to historic properties.



## Make your voice heard.

Whether you have any knowledge or expertise in building-related matters, we want to know what you would like to see constructed in your neighborhood.



## We're all in this together.

The outcome of this project will affect property owners, building professionals, and City officials and staff. Working together, we can create a product that allows the City and its citizens to effectively preserve historic districts for future generations.

# We Want You! to Participate in the Design Guidelines Process

In order for this project to be successful, it needs to be inclusive and representative of the Houston Heights Historic Districts community. You can help and make your voice heard. Here's how:

- ✧ Attend one or more community meetings. During these meetings, we will share information and gather your feedback. The next meeting will take place on **Thursday, January 14, 2016** from **5:30–7:30 p.m.** at **St. Andrew's Episcopal Church** at **1819 Heights Boulevard**.
- ✧ Sign up to receive this newsletter via email, or look for it at the Heights Neighborhood Library or the Fire Station community center. Share it with your friends and neighbors.
- ✧ Visit the Houston Heights Design Guidelines website at <http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/HistoricPres/Design-Guidelines-Heights.html>
- ✧ Sign up for the Houston Heights Design Guidelines email list to get up-to-the-minute information right in your inbox. To subscribe, visit the website (above) and complete the registration form.
- ✧ Participate in our survey: **COMING IN MARCH 2016!**
- ✧ Share your input and feedback with Steph McDougal (Project Manager):
  - Email [Steph.McDougal@HoustonTX.gov](mailto:Steph.McDougal@HoustonTX.gov)
  - Call 832-393-6541
  - Send a letter to City of Houston, Attn: Planning/ Steph McDougal, P.O. Box 1562, Houston, TX 77251-1562