

General Guidelines for Window Replacement for Historic Districts in the Highland Park Neighborhood

To begin, window replacement in the City of Birmingham requires a Building Permit, replacement without a permit can result in fines and possibly having to remove any changes you have made. When you or a contractor applies for a permit for a property in a Historic District the request will be sent to the Local Historic Advisory Committee for review, and the determination of this Committee will then be forwarded as a recommendation to the City of Birmingham Design Review Committee, which has the final say on whether a permit can be issued.

Before working with a contractor, you should be sure that they offer a product that can comply with these guidelines, or a permit will not be issued. You can also ask for a preliminary opinion from the Local Committee to establish what would or would not be acceptable.

Windows Generally

From the local to the national level, it is a fundamental preservation principle to repair rather than replace. Original windows were constructed to that the individual components could be repaired, instead of requiring an entire new unit if one-piece breaks or rots. Common window issues that can be repaired include:

- paint buildup
- missing or aging glazing compound/putty
- inoperability
- rotted, damaged or weathered wood

If the desire to replace a historic window is based on energy concerns, studies show that retrofits to historic windows (many of them DIY) can produce a comparable level of energy efficiency to new windows with a much better return on investment and at a fraction of the cost of replacement windows; these retrofits can include:

- interior and/or exterior storms
- cellular or insulating shades
- weather-stripping

Replacement

Replacement of historic windows should always be a last resort. If after careful evaluation, a window is deemed beyond repair or found to be not historic, thoughtful consideration should be given to the window chosen for replacement. Small differences between replacement in appearance historic windows can make big differences in appearance.

The following is the adopted standard for window replacement in Highland Park:

Original windows should be maintained and repaired as necessary, including replacing broken panes with matching new ones, and repairing or replacing framing elements with new pieces to match the originals. Wood framing elements and sashes should be kept well painted. Where window replacement is necessary due to extreme deterioration or damage, new units shall match the originals as closely as possible in appearance. Addition of window types not in keeping with the style of the building, e.g., picture windows, will be discouraged.

Window openings in upper floors of the front of the building shall not be boarded up and shall not be filled in without prior approval by the Design Review Committee. Window panes shall not be painted.

Storm windows are permitted but should not obscure or confuse the appearance of the original windows. Storm windows are to be painted or have a finish that matches the existing trim.

What that means

When choosing replacements, qualities of historic windows should be used as criteria. Consider the following features of historic windows:

- trim detail
- size, shape of frame, sash
- location of meeting rail
- recess of window from wall plane
- materials, reflective qualities of glass
- muntin, mullion profiles, configuration

Before investing in replacement windows, consider the following:

Generally protected historic buildings require retention of window openings, meaning replacement windows should be sized to fit the original opening-which may not be considered a “standard size” by modern standards.

Vinyl is not an appropriate material for replacement windows in most historic districts. Replacement windows are typically required to be either wood or aluminum clad wood with exterior muntins.

Modern windows have a life expectancy of anywhere from 10 to 40 years before they require replacement. Also, most modern windows cannot be repaired, meaning if one part of the window breaks/fails, then the entire window unit must be replaced.

General Notes

Where the window replacements are not visible to the public there may be more flexibility. However, generally the fronts and sides of buildings are visible from the street and have a significant impact on the historic character of the structure. Even rear facades can be visible depending on the siting of the building. This will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. However, the removal of a viable original window in a less visible location may not be approved.