

# INTRODUCTION TO THE BACK BAY ARCHITECTURAL COMMISSION

Sue Prindle and Susie Shafer

Co-chairs, NABB Architecture Committee

Living in an Historic District is largely a joy, but it can also be a challenge for those unfamiliar with this concept. As stewards of our buildings, we need to respect their historic qualities, even as we work to improve and update them. The outline below is intended as a primer on working with the Back Bay Architectural Commission (BBAC), which has jurisdiction over all exterior changes to buildings in the Back Bay.

## **What do I need to apply for?**

Any proposed exterior work (whether or not it is visible from a street or alley) must be reviewed by the BBAC, an agency that operates within the Environment Department of City Hall. Review is required not just for major exterior renovations, but also for exterior maintenance and for such changes as roofs and roof decks, new windows, exterior mechanical equipment, and major landscaping projects such as tree removal.

## **How do I do it?**

If you are contemplating any exterior work, the first step is to review the [Guidelines for the Residential District](#), which were adopted by the Commission in 1990. These guidelines describe the practices that the Commission has adopted to ensure that proposals are consistent with the architecture of the district. The guidelines for the residential district and the commercial district (which vary somewhat) are available on the Commission's website, [boston.gov/landmarks/historic/backbay.asp](http://boston.gov/landmarks/historic/backbay.asp). The website also includes instructions for filing an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness and a list of filing and hearing dates. (Applications are generally due at least two weeks before the hearings, which are the second Wednesday of every month.)

We recommend previewing your application before filing it with Joseph Cornish, Director of Design Review, who can be reached in Room 701 of City Hall at 617-635-3850 or at [Joseph.Cornish@boston.gov](mailto:Joseph.Cornish@boston.gov). If your proposal is consistent with the relevant guidelines, it may be approved administratively, which means you will not be required to attend the Commission's hearing. However, if the proposal is inconsistent with the guidelines or will have significant visual impact, it will be scheduled for review by the Commission. Once you have filed a complete application for the Certificate of Appropriateness, along with your plans and context photos, and have paid the fee (which varies with the extent of the project), the Commission is required to act on your proposal at its next hearing.

### **What About the Zoning Code?**

One word of warning: Unless your application complies with the zoning laws, the BBAC generally will not hear it until you obtain the required zoning variance. The Back Bay is an H-3-65 district, meaning that the buildings can be no higher than 65', and the mass of the building can be no more than three times the lot size. There are also strict front, rear, and side yard setback requirements that help preserve our open space. If you want to make any additions or changes to the shape of your building, you will need to find out whether you need a variance. If you have an architect, he or she can tell you. Or you can check the Zoning Code online at the BPDA website or go to the Inspectional Services Department (ISD) at 1010 Massachusetts Avenue to have your plans reviewed. If relief is required, you will have to seek it from the Zoning Board of Appeal—a process that can take several months.

### **What happens if I don't go through the process?**

BBAC approval is required in order to obtain a Building Permit from ISD. If you proceed with your project without these approvals, the Commission may bring you before its Violations Committee and require that the new construction be stopped, mitigated, or removed.

The BBAC has been and continues to be an important protector of the historic architecture of the Back Bay neighborhood. Our committee would be glad to talk further with you about the Commission and its work, as well as any projects you are planning. We can always be contacted through the NABB office ([architecture@NABBonline.com](mailto:architecture@NABBonline.com) or 617-247-3961).