



February 22, 2014

Friends in Oakwood,

The controversy over the last few months in Oakwood about the design of the new home of Louis Cherry and Marsha Gordon has been one of the saddest and most disturbing of my 35+ year career in historic preservation.

Neighbors have been pitted against neighbors, and false rumors and innuendo have filled the social media. Further, much of what's being said is completely contrary to more than a half-century of best practice in the field of historic preservation. Since at least the 1960s, most practitioners in preservation have strongly favored contemporary design for new construction in historic districts. More on that later.

As someone who doesn't live in Oakwood, but has been involved for decades with trying to help the neighborhood in a variety of ways, this controversy feels very destructive. It appears to be tearing the neighborhood apart, giving Oakwood an unwarranted reputation for being hostile and closed minded.

As a lawyer and preservationist, it worries me greatly that Mr. Cherry and Ms. Gordon have been left in an untenable limbo. They went through the entire process of design review with the Raleigh Historic Development Commission, making changes to their plans as suggested by the commission, and they duly got their Certificate of Appropriateness and a valid building permit. And now the future of their new home is at issue. They are being told that they need legal representation to complete the construction of their home, despite its having been fully approved, and that they proceed "at their own risk."

Imagine being in their position. They followed the rules, and now because of legal action taken by a neighbor, their home – and their life savings – are in jeopardy. Does this mean that anyone who wants to build a house in Oakwood or add an addition does so "at their own risk"? That you would have to hire a lawyer to obtain any valid COA? Why would anyone want to live there, if that's the case?

***I believe that the design of the Cherry/Gordon home is in line with a half-century of preservation philosophy and practice, contrary to the assertions of their opponents.***

Most of Raleigh's historic districts were built over a period of decades – house-by-house, owner-by-owner. Thus, unlike modern subdivisions, they contain numerous styles and sizes, and it is this richness that gives them their character. They are mosaics, made up of many distinctive parts. No one style predominates so it is not useful to prescribe stylistic limitations. Therefore, most local historic district design guidelines do not include "style" as a criterion to be considered, nor does the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation (first promulgated in the late 1970s).

A 1920s brick Georgian Revival house (formal, symmetrical, simply detailed) couldn't be more different from an 1870s frame Second Empire cottage (exuberant, asymmetrical, and richly detailed), and a 1910s Four Square (boxy, low hip roof, central chimneys, symmetrical, practical) is completely unlike a 1920s English Cottage (irregular form, multiple high-pitched gables, front chimney, asymmetrical, historically derived), even though they are only a decade apart. And yet, these radically different styles co-exist

peacefully in our historic districts. In fact it is the differences between adjacent structures that bring the details into focus.

Hopefully the evolution of styles did not end on the day when a local historic district was enacted, and that's why preservation professionals strongly support integrating "modern" design in a historic district. The richness will continue to get even richer as our own generation adds to the mix.

The design guidelines that are used in most local historic districts in North Carolina and elsewhere are modeled on guidelines that were originally developed in 1966 as part of a Master Plan for the historic district in Savannah. The Design Standards did not include "Style" in the long list of elements to be reviewed by the historic district commission. The 1966 standards were not prescriptive as to style.

Today, nearly a half century later, the Savannah guidelines still do not include "Style" in its Design Standards and they still are not prescriptive as to style. "Contemporary design" is explicitly accepted.

In 1976, Tarboro's new historic preservation plan, typical of many other plans adopted forty years ago, supported new design for infill:

These standards must be comprehensive and as fair as possible. *They should be equally applicable to all good examples of any architectural style so that bias towards one particular style does not occur. Thus, for example, a new building of modern design which meets the standards should be acceptable to the commission....*

The intent is to make new construction harmonize with the buildings already in the area and to prevent serious incongruities. *But there is no intent to prescribe any type of architecture or building style and thereby freeze the area into a particular style or period.* [Emphasis added.]

In *A Manual for North Carolina Historic District Commissions*, the 1978 publication by Keep North Carolina Beautiful, "style" is not included in a long list of potential Design Guidelines. It notes:

Many preservationists believe that contemporary design should be encouraged in historic districts. They maintain that a historic district reflects a continuous and continuing thread of time, and that the present generation's contributions to a district should reflect their own times. They also believe that period designs compromise the integrity of the truly old buildings; the untrained eye, on the other hand, notices how the imitation fails to meet the standards of the real thing.

In 1977 my own Masters project for the UNC Department of City and Regional Planning was a study of North Carolina's twelve local historic districts. I put together an extensive questionnaire for the districts' chairs and/or staff to complete and I interviewed representatives of each district. C. D. Arthur, Chairman of the Raleigh Historic District Commission, and Linda Harris (now Edmisten), Preservation Planner for Raleigh's City Planning Department answered the following question regarding the Oakwood Historic District in March 1977:

67. How would you generally characterize the Commission's attitude toward compatible "contemporary" designs being incorporated into the district(s)?

NOT FAVORABLE    1    2    3    4    5    FAVORABLE  
**5 WAS CIRCLED**

The following comment was handwritten in the margin:

The Architectural Guidelines require that new buildings be compatible and precludes any “imitative” designs.

The 1980 book, *Old & New Relationship: Design Relationship*, published by The Preservation Press, starts out:

We save old buildings because they are good ones. There are many ways to place new buildings successfully alongside old buildings, but what goes best with good old architecture is, simply, good new architecture.

In *Early Raleigh Neighborhoods and Buildings*, the 1983 publication by the Raleigh City Planning Department, the Raleigh Historic District Commission and the Raleigh Historic Properties Commission, the section on New Construction starts as follows:

Contemporary interpretations of historic architectural and environmental elements of a neighborhood’s context can lead to innovative designs that are characterized by enduring qualities. This has been displayed repeatedly in works that reflect historical images linking us to our culture while they convey an innovative and timely approach to an architectural problem have become valued reminders of their eras.

Throughout the last four decades numerous “contemporary” buildings have been built in historic districts across North Carolina, including those in Raleigh.

This exposition could go on and on.

***I believe that the design of the Cherry/Gordon home is solidly in this well-established tradition.***

A few observations: They are building a new house on a shallow, wide lot which is very different in configuration than most lots in Oakwood. If their lot had been narrow and deep, a house similar to what they are building would probably have provoked little controversy. Mr. Cherry, an architect who has substantial experience with historic rehabilitation (including Burning Coal Theatre at Murphy School), designed a house that would fit compatibly on a peculiar (and totally legal) lot.

I would also note that their new house is scarcely “ultra-modern” or even “modernist,” as some detractors claim. I would describe it as a contemporary house that takes its design cues from earlier styles.

Finally, the new house is modest in size, smaller than many houses within a one-to-two block radius. Oakwood is full of houses of different scale and style on virtually every street. I’ve read comments about how the teardowns and McMansions are coming to Oakwood, thanks to this infill. This new house on Euclid Street, which is being built on an empty lot, certainly doesn’t presage that! In fact, Raleigh’s historic district guidelines discourage teardowns by limiting the size of a post-teardown infill thereby making it economically difficult to turn a profit. Oakwood doesn’t have to worry about becoming Anderson Drive!

The Cherry/Gordon home will be part of the continuum of this vibrant architectural community of Oakwood, which is not a museum of historic homes in one style built in one period. Carriages do not fill Oakwood’s streets; cars and segways do! And despite what has been said, the segways will not stop coming through Oakwood because a contemporary home has been built in 2014.

The candlelight tour will not go bankrupt either. Statements like this, which have been repeatedly made, are meant to scare people into thinking that their way of life and their community are being threatened. The Jeff Davis modern house at 530 Elm Street has been included in the tour not once but at least twice in recent years. Indeed, I would assert that every candlelight tour should include some of the new houses in the neighborhood to reflect the fact that Oakwood isn't a place that's been "pickled." It's alive, and good new construction, such as the Cherry/Gordon home, will allow future generations to understand and enjoy the ever-evolving character of the historic district.

My credentials as a preservationist have been questioned (in quite strident voices) by critics of this new house. Anyone who knows me and my career knows better. I can take the heat...otherwise, I couldn't have stayed in my job for 35 years. But I shouldn't have to take any heat in this case, nor should Mr. Cherry and Ms. Gordon. The conversations should be civil, and when the process of getting a valid building permit has been completed with full transparency, it should be time to move on.

Please think about the way that all of the increasingly negative and hostile discourse that has been floating around the neighborhood for the past several months is the real threat to the health and fabric of Oakwood.

It's time for peaceful reconciliation, and I hope that the leaders of Oakwood will bring people together to have civil conversations about this neighborhood's past and its future. It would be such a shame for the progress of the last forty years to be reversed by internal battles.

Sincerely,

*Myrick*

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