Revitalizing Older Houses in Charlestown

BOSTON & CHARLESTOWN/CIRCA 1770

Historic preservation involves much more than the glorification of major landmarks like the Old State House or Bunker Hill Monument. It also involves area preservation, such as that underway on Beacon Hill or in Back Bay under the guidance of special architectural commissions. Even where there is no formal historic district, there are historic preservation implications in the rehabilitation of buildings in older neighborhoods—especially in areas as historically rich and architecturally varied as Charlestown. Here the considerations are as much those of urban design as of historic preservation. This booklet is the result of such a merging of preservation and urban design concerns.

Since 1969, the Boston Redevelopment Authority has administered a Federally assisted historic preservation planning project, the purpose of which is to develop a comprehensive preservation program for the city and to undertake architectural surveys and special studies. As part of this project, George Stephen, Senior Rehabilitation Architect at the B.R.A., worked out the guidelines presented in text and illustrations as the major portion of this booklet. At the same time, Richard S. Joslin, Director of Urban Design, wrote an opening section giving the historical background of present-day Charlestown, with emphasis on developments of the past century and a half rather than on the Revolutionary period. Both authors consulted with the preservation planning staff of the B.R.A. and utilized the files of the Boston Landmarks Commission.

This booklet is intended for the people of Charlestown, particularly for the homeowners who make decisions about the rehabilitation of their buildings. It is intended to show that there is something of value in even the most unassuming of Charlestown houses and that some ways of remodeling are better than others, for the sake of the environmental character of the community. The purpose is not to dictate but to suggest, with reasons that should be convincing to anyone who cares about Charlestown. If this booklet is successful, similar publications will be prepared for other sections of the city. Meanwhile, we hope that this one will be interesting and useful to the people of Charlestown.

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Historical Background

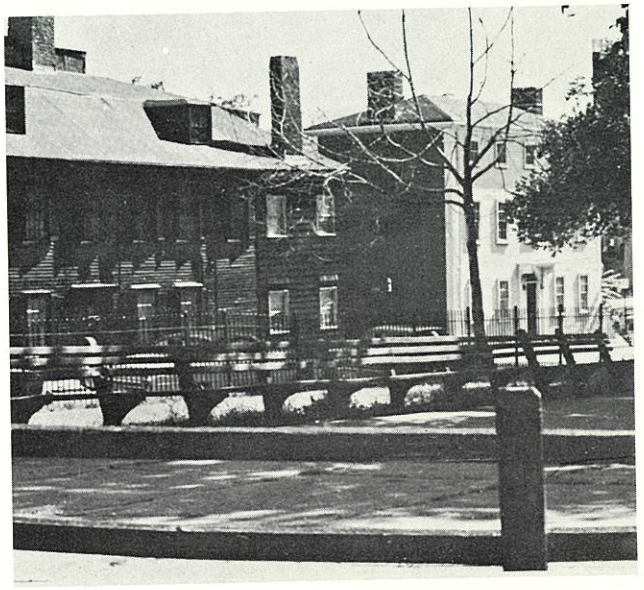
The residents of Charlestown are famous for their loyalty to their community and for their pride in their homes and neighborhoods. In a town of family houses, many families have lived here for five or six generations. They are the "Townies," part of a close-knit, stable and proud community.

Complementing this strong family tradition is the distinct physical character and shape of Charlestown. Partly, this image is due to topography. The town is built almost all on the flanks of a hill, with the commanding Bunker Hill Monument at its summit. The lowlands are bordered by the Mystic and Charles Rivers, isolating the town from its neighbors. The general appearance of Charlestown is a mixture of wood-frame clapboard and brick houses, constructed in the various architectural styles of the nineteenth century. The shape of the community is strongly expressed in the rows of these attached houses, which closely hug the edges of the sloping streets. The streets, in many cases, lead into the historic landscaped parks—Monument Square, Winthrop Square and Harvard Mall—that provide a contrast of open space and greenery.

In the last year or two, as the blight that once threatened to overwhelm the town has been arrested and much new construction of housing and community facilities has taken place, there has been increasing interest in repairing and modernizing these older houses. The number of owner-occupied houses has grown, and more younger Charlestown families are showing renewed faith in the future of their town. These owners are aware that their homes contribute to the distinctive quality of the neighborhood and have architectural merit, but they still face the dilemma of determining the most appropriate and economical method to rehabilitate the building exteriors. This booklet, prepared by the B.R.A.'s Urban Design staff, was written to help answer that question.

Before getting into details of remodeling, it is appropriate to review how and when these houses were built. The major historic events which took place in Charlestown have been well documented, but the history of the town's development is less familiar.

Founded in 1629, Charlestown is one year older than Boston. Originally settled by English immigrants, the first village was built at the southeasterly tip of the peninsula, on the shore between Breed's Hill and the lower Town Hill, opposite Boston. The town developed around its market place (City Square) and extended from the waterfront back to the Phipps Street Cemetery and the Militia Training Ground (Winthrop Square). In the eighteenth century, the principal industries of this colonial seaport were on its wharves and shipyards, as later it would be in its Navy Yard. Charlestown also grew to be known as a center of American Colonial craftsmanship. This was the celebrated town of approximately four hundred dwellings and public buildings that, on that fateful day in 1775, the British completely burned to the ground. Only some of the street pattern and the location of the early major public open spaces survived to record the first 140 years of the town's growth. Consequently, Charlestown's oldest existing houses date from the rebuilding period which followed the Revolutionary War. These few late Georgian (1780–1795) clapboard



houses are some of the only examples of this era remaining in present-day Boston. As a result of the British destruction, Charlestown was almost completely built during the nineteenth century, giving the town much of its unique quality.

In the early nineteenth century the residents continued to rebuild on the original town site, and then began to expand the town further westward along and off present-day Main Street and into the Town Hill area. The houses were in the architectural style of the new nation, the Federal style (1795–1830). They were clapboard or brick, both attached and free-standing. Several such houses, scattered around this area, remain today. The Commandant's house and several of the earliest brick buildings in the Navy Yard (founded 1801) are of this period. The notable, recently completed Thompson Square Triangle restoration project is a gathering-together of some of these late Georgian and Federal style houses.

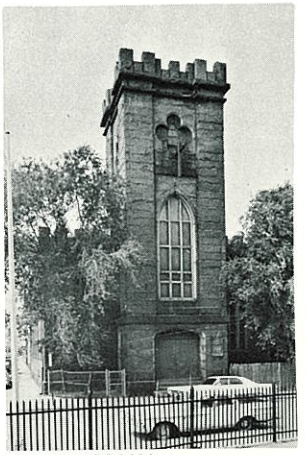
In 1786 the first bridge, the Charles River Toll-bridge, connected Charlestown to Boston. In 1803 the twenty-seven mile long Middlesex Canal was opened linking Charlestown to the back country of Lowell and the Merrimac Valley. Soon, other bridges and causeways connected the town to Cambridge, Somerville, Medford and Chelsea. By 1830 Charlestown was a mixed settlement of local workers and Boston commuters. The continued growth of the community had eliminated much of Charlestown's rural setting. The architecture of this period, like all architectural styles, was not merely a fashion of the time, but was rooted in the prevalent culture and philosophy of the time. In this second third of the nineteenth century, the culture of this country found great affinity and relevant values to emulate in the qualities of the classic civilizations. The first architectural translation of this interest was the development of the Greek Revival style (1830–1850), derived from that of the earliest democratic civilization. In 1839, at the summit of Breed's Hill, a formal and symmetrical public square was laid out as an appropriate setting for the great commemorative (albeit misnamed) Bunker Hill Monument. Solomon Willard, the monument's architect and the designer of the Greek-templed St. Paul's Cathedral on Boston's Tremont Street, here followed the ancient model of an Egyptian obelisk. Other monumental granite Greek Revival buildings were built at the Navy Yard, some of these designed by Alexander Parris, architect of Boston's Quincy Market buildings. At St. John's Episcopal Church (1841) on Devens Street, it was deemed that Gothic design would be more appropriate. During this period, the slopes of Breed's, Bunker and Town Hills became dotted with carpenter-builders' white painted Greek-templed housefronts.

It was at the middle of the nineteenth century that Charlestown's growth suddenly underwent its greatest expansion. This was the result of the tremendous population surge in neighboring Boston. In the short decade from 1845 to 1855 the Great Immigration brought 130,000 Irish from the suffering southern and western counties of Ireland to the Port of Boston. With only farming

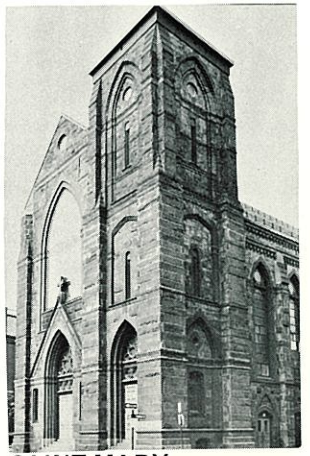
skills and no money, most had no choice but to settle where they landed, swelling Boston's population by 40% in the decade. Having, like Charlestown, enjoyed a history of gradual growth and assimilation, Boston was unprepared for such an enormous and sudden influx. Most of these newly-arrived citizens found themselves crowded into the oldest and most deteriorated section of town, the North End and the so-called Fort Hill district (now part of downtown Boston). The conditions of these areas continued to be a scandal until the city began clearing Fort Hill in 1866. The job of clearance was completed by the Great Fire of Boston in 1872. One factor confining the great numbers of immigrant families here was the absence of public transportation. It was not until the 1850's, with the advent of the earliest rapid transit, horse-drawn trolleys and public ferryboat service, that the new Irish population was able to move out to the suburbs of East Boston, South Boston, the South End and Charlestown. In 1854 the Middlesex Railroad was chartered and began running horse-drawn street railway cars from Boston to Somerville through Charlestown. (The nickel fare remained in effect until after 1900!) Within the following decade, the population of Charlestown dramatically doubled to 25,000. The new residents were almost entirely the recently arrived Irish. These were the forefathers of many of today's residents.

The last half of the nineteenth century was, consequently, the period of the greatest building activity. This was also the era when American architecture indulged in a series of chronologically overlapping stylistic revivals: Gothic Revival (1840–1890), Italianate/Bracketed (1840–1875), French Academic/Mansard (1860–1880), Romanesque Revival (1850–1895), Queen Anne (1875–1890), and Georgian Revival (1890–1920) — all of which can conveniently be lumped together as Victorian architecture. The most accomplished examples of Charlestown's Victorian revivals are the prominent public buildings of the age. Of these, the three important parish churches stand out: St. Francis de Sales (1862; P. C. Keely, architect; Romanesque/Celtic Revival), St. Catherine of Sienna (1887; Charles J. Bateman, architect; Romanesque Revival) and St. Mary's, replacing the earlier smaller St. Mary's of 1829 (1892; Warren, Winthrop and Soley, architects; Gothic Revival). The robust and colorful Charlestown Savings Bank is also a notable example of commercial Gothic Revival (1875).

These public buildings were the accessories to the bulk of building construction which was, of course, residential. To meet the increasing demand for houses, builders in the 1840's and 50's at first constructed those late Greek Revival brick row houses such as we see lining Monument Avenue, along Adams Street in Winthrop Square, and Harvard Street around the Mall. Many owners of older free-standing houses sold their large yards after dividing them up into developable row-house parcels. Land values continued to rise and the pressures for more housing steadily increased. These reasons, plus the fact that average newcomers, although employed, still lacked the financial resources needed for an initial downpayment, proved that the great

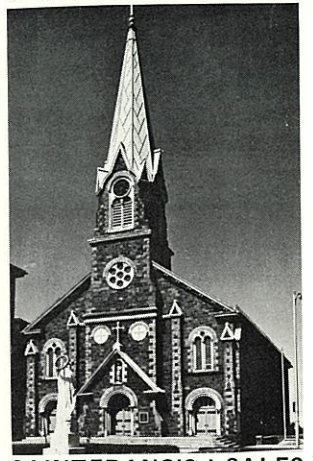


SAINT JOHN



SAINT MARY

SAINT CATHERINE



SAINT FRANCIS de SALES

housing demand could not be met in the traditional way. Until this era, houses in the gradually developing American cities were almost always single-family units. Persons who could not financially manage their own home had rented rooms or "boarded" in the homes of others. Now the sudden new demand for housing led to the conversion of existing single-family homes into multi-family units. Conversion of single-family houses in Charlestown has continued from mid-century to the present day. In the 1860's, contractors built many mansarded clapboard row-houses which they adapted for two families; one family to live on the first floor and the other on the upper two floors. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, contractors had devised a building which appeared similar to the three-story row house, but was actually three floors of one-story apartments. The development of this new type of housing, the three-decker, was more significant than any stylistic change. It quickly became the prevalent house type for the rest of Charlestown. It provided the opportunity for the recently arrived family to purchase their home, where they could live comfortably on the first floor and transfer the financial burden to the two floors of tenants above. Another practical benefit became readily apparent as the second generation more easily set up housekeeping in a building owned by in-laws, both generations enjoying equal comfort and privacy.

These sensible, solidly-built structures were built for the expanding new working middle class. They are characterized by high-ceilinged rooms, large windows, and frequently by shallow coal-burning fireplaces. They were practical, convenient and popular a century ago, and with the addition of modern utilities they have the same practical advantages today.

In the 1870's and 80's, the wood clapboard early triple-deckers were built up and down the regularly laid out blocks on the previously undeveloped western and northern slopes of Bunker and Breed's Hill. The exteriors were embellished with Mansard or Bracket details of the period. The decoration was more economical or vernacular than that of the more pretentious brick mansions built by wealthy Bostonians at this time around Monument Square. But these small apartment houses, with their repetitive rhythm of regularly spaced windows and recessed doorways were stylishly painted in the Victorian palette of subtle colors contrasting the clapboards to the trim, the front door, the projecting cornice and, where present, the shutters and bay windows. If not of great architectural significance, these buildings provided the setting for lively and interesting streets and proud neighborhoods.

The pressures of development towards the end of the nineteenth century led to the landfilling of the tidal marshes that surrounded the hills of Charlestown for industrial development. It was at this time that the top of Bunker Hill was cut down to provide fill for the B & M railroad yards. (As a result of the levelling, the two hills, Bunker and Breed's, are hardly distinguishable today.) The railroad, the Navy Yard and building construction were the three largest local employers in

the last half of the nineteenth century. This was indicative of the revolution that greater Boston's economy had undergone. At the close of the first half of the century the faltering mercantile (trading) economy had gradually been transformed into a robust industrial (manufacturing) economy, only possible because of the newly arrived work force.

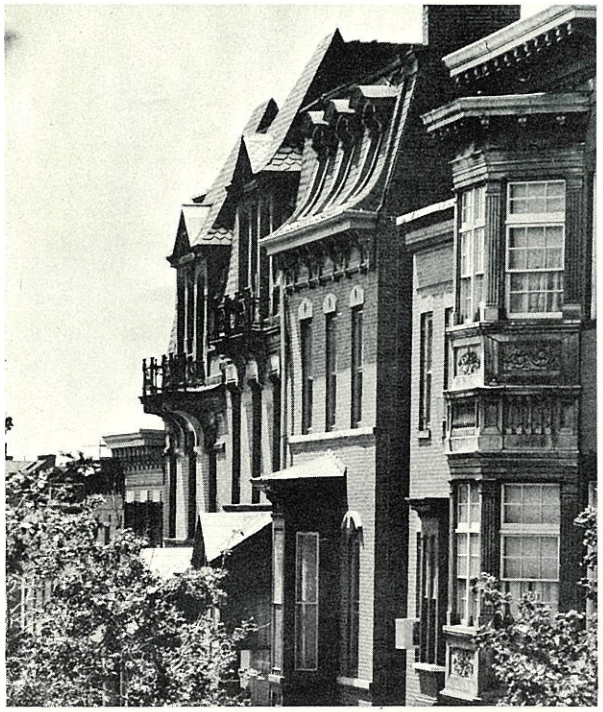
The financial pressure of Charlestown's great growth, the need for money to pay for new streets, new water and sewerage facilities and new schools, led the community in 1853 to seek annexation to the City of Boston. Because of legal technicalities, annexation was not achieved until 1873.

At the close of the century, another influx of new citizens arrived, this time from southern Italy and Sicily. The Italians, following much the same path as the earlier English and Irish immigrants, soon were settling in Charlestown. They are the grandparents of a good percentage of today's residents.

Completely developed by the end of the nineteenth century, Charlestown suffered some harsh adjustments to the twentieth century. The Elevated was constructed in 1901, and by 1912 the citizens were circulating the first of many petitions asking for its removal. In 1942 the Boston Housing Authority bulldozed several blocks on the north slope for a housing project. In 1962 the Tobin Bridge over the Mystic River sliced between the town and its Navy Yard, with ramps chewing up much of City Square. But more harmful to the town's future than these scars were the deterioration and blight that appeared in the late 1930's at the end of the Depression. In the lowlands surrounding the residential hill, blocks of declining and failed businesses in a neighborhood of abandoned shacks and tenements started to spread their depressing influence on the town. The blight, as it continued to grow, threatened to move up the hill. Many of the early triple-deckers, well maintained for almost a century, fell into the hands of landlords who either were not interested or not financially able to keep them up and maintain them with sympathy. Some of these houses were covered with asphalt shingles, and their trim, moldings and decorations were stripped off and thrown away, giving them the blank, despairing look of lower quality tenements. This also took its toll on the quality of the neighborhood environment and morale.

By the close of the Second World War the younger families, now more mobile with automobiles, were being attracted away from the community to the suburbs where they found veterans' financed housing and attractive new schools. Charlestown's population declined dramatically, from 31,000 in 1950 to 16,000 today.

In 1961, a young ex-Congressman from Charlestown, John F. Kennedy, became President of the United States. His, and subsequent administrations, initiated programs for the renewal of cities suffering problems similar to those that beset Charlestown. In 1966, the development and accep-



tance of the Urban Renewal Plan for Charlestown became a controversial and sometimes raucous affair between the local citizens and the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Now, after a great effort from both the community and the Authority, the success of the renewal program is becoming clearly visible. The blight has been removed. In its place is the first of new family housing: Charles New Town (Sert, Jackson, architects) and scattered elderly housing (John Carr, architect). Along with new playgrounds, streets and utilities, the renewal plan calls for an almost complete replacement of public facilities. The first of these have been completed: Kent Elementary School (Earl Flansburgh, architect), the branch library (Eduardo Catalano, architect), and the fire station (F. Frederick Bruck, architect). Still to come are the Bunker Hill Elementary School (Sert, Jackson, architects), the high school/community recreation center (Willoughby Marshall, architect) and a new high school (Hill, Miller, Friedlander, Hollander, architects). The new Bunker Hill Community College (Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott, architects) is under construction, as are the new highway bypass and the new M.B.T.A. line. The successful containerized shipping terminal is the first of new industrial developments. A shopping center and the Mishawum housing are yet to come. Once the new M.B.T.A. line is operational, the most dramatic event will take place, the removal of the Elevated.

The heart of Charlestown, however, is the older residential district. Here the environmental quality of neighborhoods is actually much dependent upon what maintenance and improvements the individual building owners carry out. Much rehabilitation has already been done, often with the help of the B.R.A. But the future of the majority of houses and neighborhoods is properly in the hands of the residents. Increasingly the people of Charlestown have become interested in sympathetically preserving and enhancing the design qualities of these good older houses.

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Boston Redevelopment Authority

Revitalizing Older Houses in Charlestown

As a result of its history, Charlestown has inherited a unique legacy of houses of many shapes and sizes, and in many period styles. Typical examples of four of the most familiar styles are shown on the opposite page.

A few examples still exist of the oldest style to be found in Charlestown – Late Georgian. The smaller ones are characterised by the gambrel roof, which is not unlike the Mansard roof shown on the opposite page, except that the ends of the buildings (or gables) are vertical. The larger Late Georgian buildings have a similarity to those of the Federal style which immediately followed, but tend to be a little heavier in appearance and usually have quoins *(or decorative stones)* at the corners. These stones were also reproduced in wood, as in the Larkin House on Main Street.

The oldest type of house to be found in Charlestown in any significant number, however, is the Federal style house as shown on the left. Even so, they are relatively rare, and those fortunate enough to own one have something of considerable historical value. If any improvement is to be made on such a house it should, obviously, take the form of restoring the original design as far as possible – this being desirable not only from an architectural and historical point of view, but also in order to preserve or develop its full market value. Sometimes this is not an easy job – such as when the house has been covered at a later date with wall finishes such as wood, asphalt, or asbestos shingles which are alien to the original style, and which must be removed before the original clapboards can be revealed or rebuilt – but time or money spent on such a job is definitely worthwhile. Not all Federal houses are built of wood, of course; there are also some brick examples in the area. Whatever the material, however, it is especially important when restoring houses of this period to make sure that all the details and materials are appropriate and compatible, and, for those with questions or problems on such matters, the B.R.A. Rehabilitation Design Department is always glad to provide free consultation or advice.

Federal

The second illustration is of a Greek Revival house – a style popular in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and still much in evidence. While there are more elaborate examples of this style to be found in Charlestown, the version shown was selected because it it the most typical. Again, the original design should be restored as far as possible, with careful attention paid to details – particularly the ones noted on the sketch.

The last two illustrations are representative of the many styles, and mixtures of styles, that were popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. By far the greater number of houses in Charlestown were built at this time and, while it is not always necessary – or possible – to restore them exactly to their former state, they nevertheless possess a character unique to the area and should be treated with the same respect as their more "historical" brothers when being re-

Greek Revival

Mansard

Bracketed

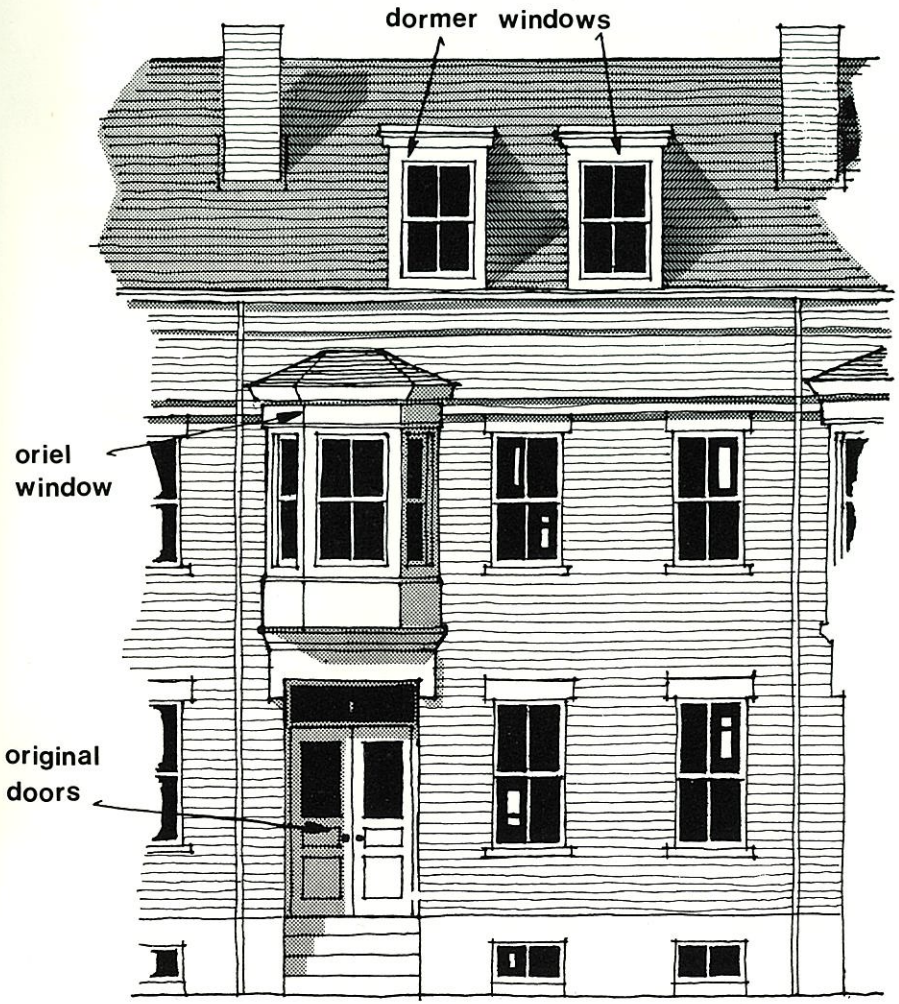
modeled. The rest of this booklet will deal in detail with some of the problems commonly encountered when remodeling—as opposed to restoring—such houses.

Before discussing ways of treating individual details, however, let us look more closely at two representative types of these later 19th century Charlestown houses.

On the opposite page are two sketches of a brick row house typical of many in the area. The first sketch shows the front as originally designed and—fortunately—as it still exists in many cases; the second sketch by contrast shows how the good qualities of the original design can be completely destroyed by the use of bad details in the process of remodeling.

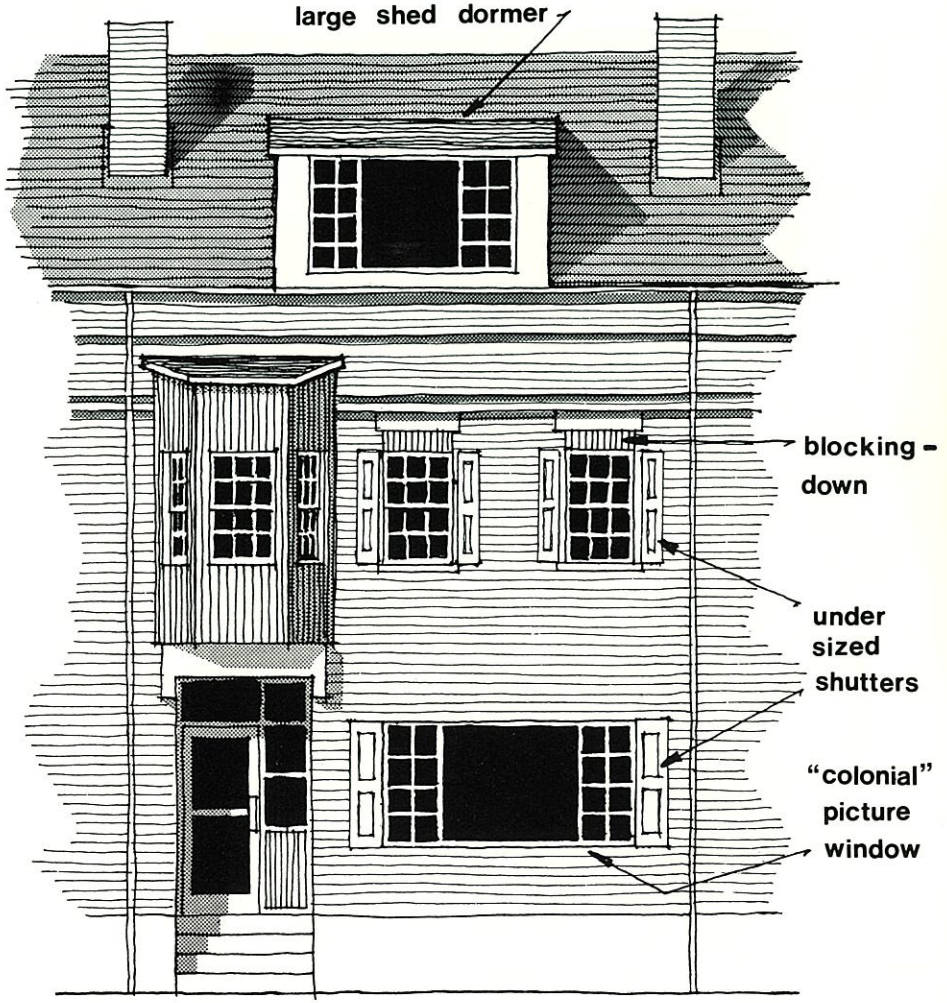
In Figure 1 it will be seen that much of the simple and harmonious quality of the original design is due to the use of consistently vertical—or upright—proportions in both the window openings *(the holes in the wall),* and the subdivisions of the glass *(the panes)*—this also being echoed in the glazed parts of the doors. In Figure 2 the simplicity and harmony of the original front have been replaced by a hodge-podge of openings and panes of all shapes and sizes—both horizontal and vertical—the end result being rendered neither "charming and old" by the use of small Colonial-type panes, nor genuinely modern by the use of large picture windows and the offset entrance door. One of the chief factors in the deterioration of the design quality in the second facade is the tampering with the original proportions of the window openings—or the "holes" in the brick wall. This has been done not only by the opening up of the ground floor to form a large horizontal hole for the picture window, but also by the blocking-down of the window heads on the second floor. (The latter has become a common practice for adapting window openings to fit smaller standard sashes, or for concealing the edges of ceilings that have been lowered beneath the heads of the existing window openings, and will be discussed more fully under "Windows" in the following notes.) Other details which have contributed to the design deterioration shown in Figure 2 are the "streamlining" of the oriel window, which deprives it of most of its former character, and the use of under-sized shutters or blinds at the windows.

A large "shed" dormer such as shown in the roof of Figure 2 does not usually improve the appearance of the front of the house, but is sometimes used in order to get more headroom in the rooms inside the roof. In such cases, whenever possible, it should be located facing the rear of the building rather than the front. Similarly, "picture" windows or large windows are also best located to the rear of the building—not just for esthetic purposes, but because they work better there and in many cases can be arranged to open onto a patio or pleasant, well-planted space, however small. It should never be forgotten that picture windows can be looked through from both sides and, when facing a street, usually lose their point by having to be heavily draped for privacy.



THE ORIGINAL FRONT

Figure 1



BAD REMODELING OF SAME

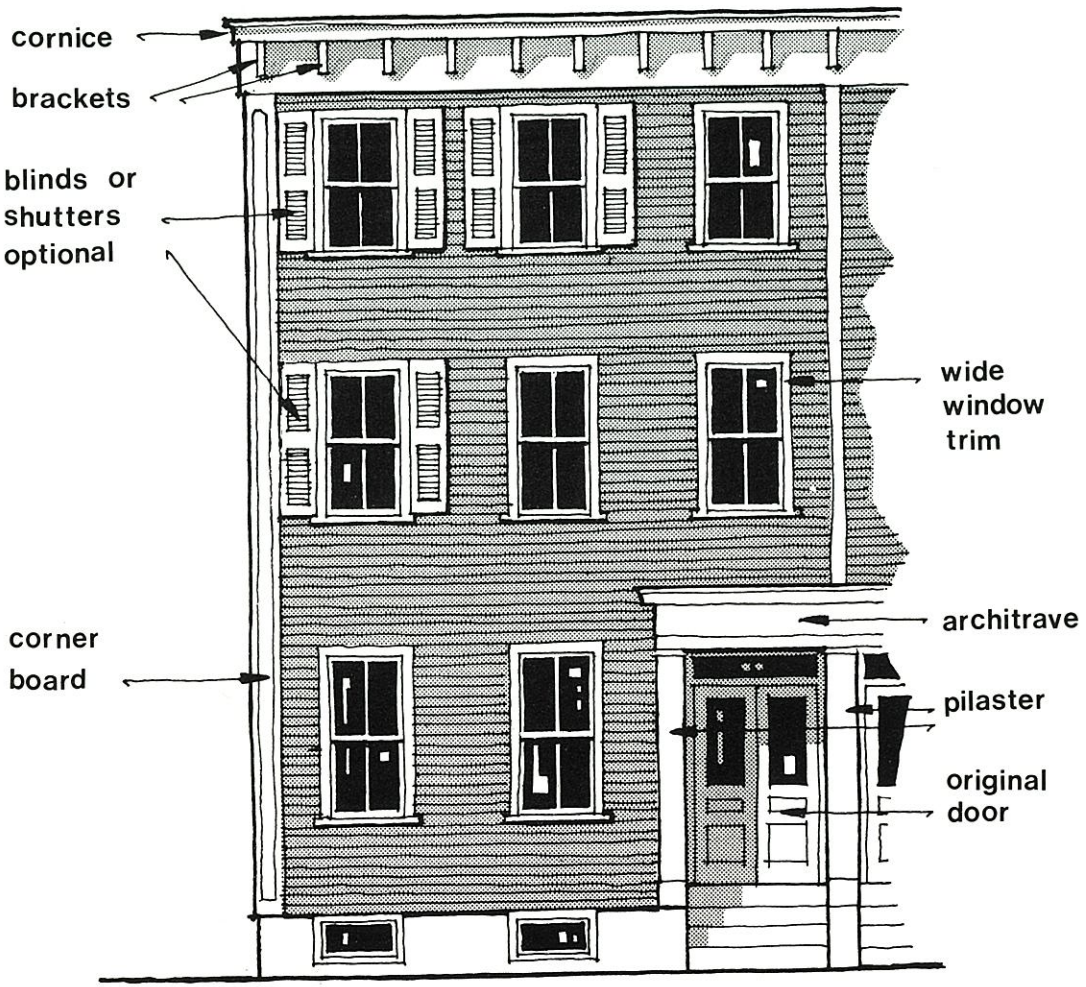
Figure 2

On the opposite page are two drawings of a wood frame house typical of many to be found in Charlestown. The first shows the original design with all the details that give it its distinct character: the narrow-gauge clapboards, the corner boards, the flat trim around the windows, the "two-over-two" panes in the windows, the recessed doorway with flat columns *(or pilasters)* and molded architrave above, and, crowning the whole facade, the deep bracketed cornice. The shutters or blinds which have been shown on some of the windows only are optional.

The second sketch, by contrast, shows the unhappy results when all the original detail is removed and replaced by certain standard current lumberyard items. An attempt has also been made to make the building look older than its real period by using details that are supposed to be of Colonial design, but which are actually only unconvincing imitations of the real thing. *(It must be added, however, that even if the details were genuine, the result would still be unsatisfactory as it is really almost impossible to make a building look older than it was when first built. The end result is always different from that of genuine restoration.)* In this example, as is often the case, the fake historical items appear mainly at the doors and windows: the stamped metal "barn" door with frills which do not belong to any known historical style, the sad imitation of a genuine Colonial pediment over the door in the form of a triangular-shaped piece of wood, the undersized shutters or blinds that don't even LOOK as if they could work and, lastly, the "six-over-six" paned windows which belong properly to the eighteenth century or to earlier nineteenth century houses in the Greek Revival style.

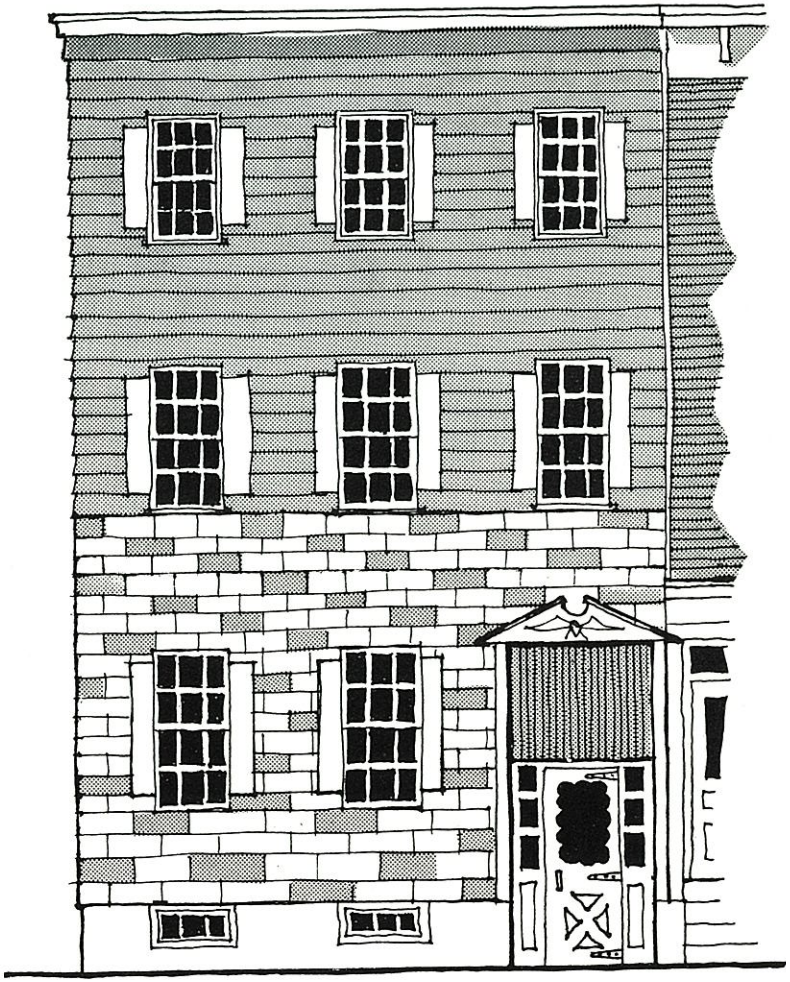
The design of the front has been further weakened in the second sketch by the removal of the corner boards and the deep cornice which framed the clapboards. Also, the upper part of the wall is now covered with wide gauge synthetic siding, and the lower part with artificial stone, with the line of demarkation up at second floor sill level, giving an indecisive half-and-half appearance to the whole front.

It will also be noted that the new outer door is flush with the sidewalk—a potential hazard which will be discussed more fully later under "Doorways."



THE ORIGINAL FRONT

Figure 1



BAD "RESTORATION" OF SAME

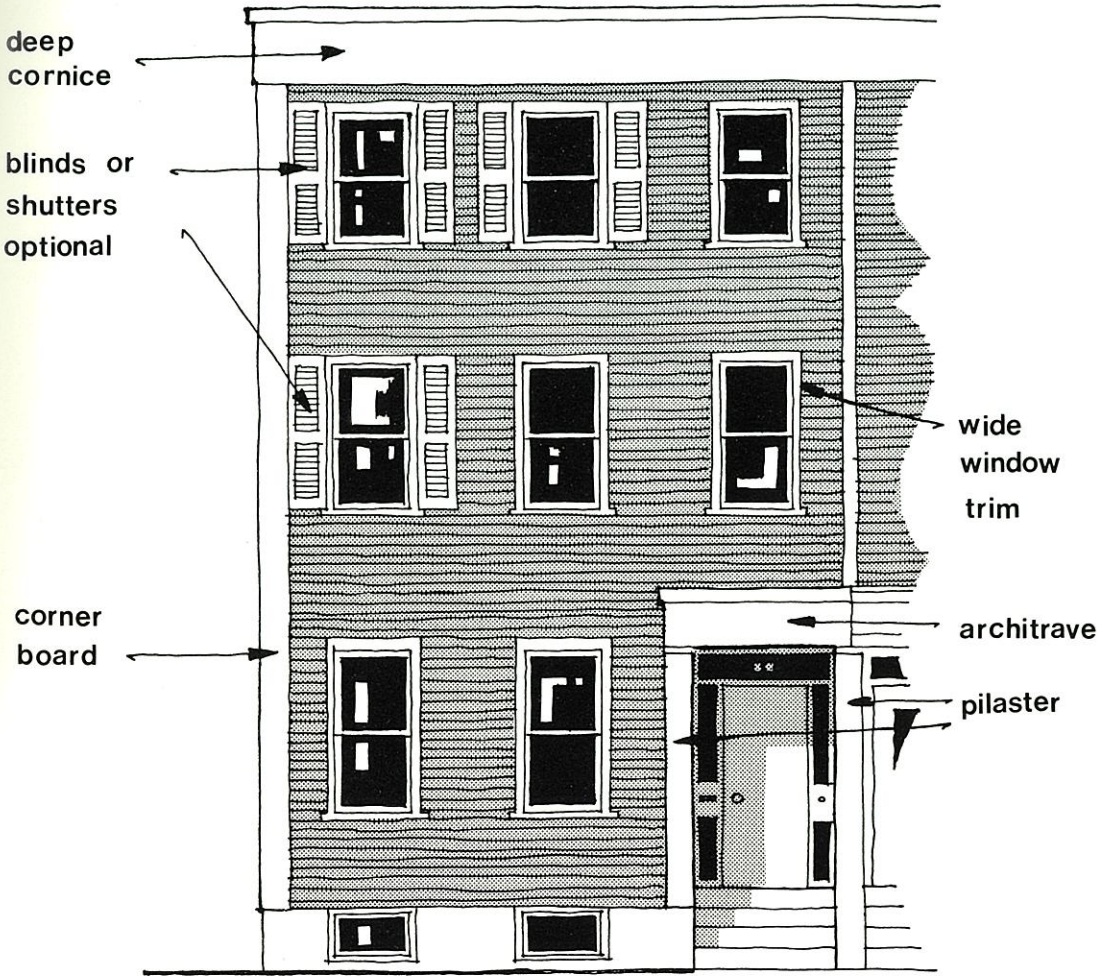
Figure 2

On the opposite page are two more versions of the same wood frame house.

The first sketch shows a simple modern treatment suitable when the original detail has deteriorated beyond the point of salvation. It will be noted, however, that despite simplification, much of the character of the house has been retained. The bracketed cornice at the roof, for instance, as well as the corner boards, window trim, and the pilasters and cornice around the doorway have all been replaced by elements which, although less complicated in detail, HAVE THE SAME VISUAL "WEIGHT." Also, the recessed doorway has been retained—one of the liveliest parts of the original design. If these details are handled well it does not make too much difference whether the clapboards are made of wood, aluminum, or vinyl—providing that the horizontal lap lines are not more than about 4" apart. If the original clapboards are still serviceable, it is probably best to leave them; otherwise, wood replacements would be the second choice from the point of view of appearance. Aluminum and vinyl siding, however, although more expensive and no improvement visually, may be preferred in some cases because of certain maintenance advantages.

The second sketch is what could be called Fake Modernism; the facade has been stripped of just about everything that gave it interest and by comparison looks bleak and inhuman. The corner boards and the window and door trim have disappeared completely, and the new panes in the windows and the sidelights of the door are all horizontally-proportioned, giving a "ladder" effect which does little for the appearance of the building. These horizontal lines are further emphasized by the widely-spaced imitation clapboards, and the whole front is now topped off not by a proper "lid" in the form of a cornice, but by a thin metal gravel-stop which gives only a "sawn-off" appearance.

We will now examine more closely some of the details just mentioned which determine the character of a house, and which, therefore, are of so much importance to the finished result of a remodeling job.



GOOD SIMPLIFICATION OF ORIGINAL FRONT

Figure 1

BAD MODERNIZATION OF SAME

Figure 2

Some Notes on the Treatment of Details

The following notes are for the guidance of those who want to make the best possible job of restoring or remodeling their house with whatever money is available, but may be in some doubt as to how the individual details should be treated—or are simply confused by the over-choice of standard building parts on the market.

When working on older houses there are three basic rules to good design:

1/ **If in doubt, try to retain as much of the original materials, detail and design as the budget will allow.**

2/ **If introducing modern parts or mixing old and new elements on the outside of a house, make sure that its character is not spoiled in the process and, if possible, get some advice from a good architect with experience of such work *(the Rehabilitation Design section of the B.R.A. is always available for consultation in these matters).***

3/ **Never try to make a building look older than it originally was by using details belonging to a previous period: this is not true restoration and the end results will never look completely genuine.**

The last rule is a very important one and deserves further explanation. Until recently, nineteenth century houses tended to be regarded as "old-fashioned" rather than "old" and were often despised both by architects and the public. For this reason, when remodeling occurred, they were usually "dressed-up" to look as if they had been built in some earlier and more respected period such as the Colonial or the Federal. With the rediscovery of the very real virtues of Victorian architecture, however—especially in comparison with much that is built today—the nineteenth century house is at last being valued for what it is, and its many and varied styles seen as a vital and interesting part of our architectural heritage. It is unnecessary, therefore—and undesirable—to add false "history" to a building by imitating the details of older styles: the results are nearly always unconvincing and detract from the building's true character. This is of particular importance in an area such as Charlestown where the buildings are largely of nineteenth century origin and give it its distinctive character, which should not be confused with that of, say, Beacon Hill or Sturbridge Village.

With these guidelines in mind we will discuss some of the more common problems that face the homeowner when remodeling, under the separate headings of Materials, the Use of Color, Windows, and Doorways, after which we will end with a few words on the importance of Planting.

Materials

It is a safe rule, generally, that nothing is going to look better than the materials in which the building was originally designed.

Brick walls, for example—unless they are of an unusually unpleasant color—should never be covered with any form of artificial siding. This is not for esthetic reasons only, for, whatever salesmen of artificial siding may say to the contrary, a brick wall is generally one of the best bargains in terms of maintenance; it may cost as much to repoint it as to cover it up with, say, asphalt shingles or artificial stone, but the end result will last at least three times as long as well as looking about a hundred times better!

Nothing can match the beauty of a richly-textured brick wall, and for this reason it is often better to use a grey or darker-tinted mortar when repointing so that the wall itself is emphasized rather than the individual bricks. *(When a light-toned mortar is used, each brick seems to stand out separately as a dark "island" in a white "sea.")* The use of darker mortar may also be appropriate when introducing areas or panels of new brickwork into a remodeling job, where it often helps the new work to relate better to the old by producing a similar richness of effect—even if the color of the bricks may be quite different.

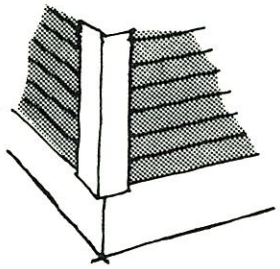
A type of brickwork to be generally avoided is that which tries to produce a sort of phoney "rustic" effect by using bricks of highly contrasted colors and tones—usually with an occasional white, or near-white, brick thrown in as if by accident. The general effect often tends to be that of a heap of bricks rather than that of a wall. . . .
If existing brickwork is to be successfully matched, all the following details must be duplicated in the new work:

1/ the color, texture, and size of the bricks themselves;
2/ the width of the joints between the bricks;
3/ the color and tone (degree of darkness) of the mortar in the joints;
4/ the type of joint *(whether it is flush with the wall or raked back to form a groove).*

It is very important to remember all these points, as much time can be wasted tracking down a matching brick, only to have the end result still look like a patch-job because of neglect of items 2, 3, and 4.

The owner of a wood frame house is, of course, faced with a much greater range of choices which can be made concerning external materials and colors. The relative merits of wood, aluminum, and vinyl clapboard siding, for instance, may have to be weighed, as well as the possibility of many different color schemes. Again, nothing is going to look better than the material for which the house was originally designed, and if this happens to be wood siding there is a strong case for retaining it or replacing it with the same material *(taking care to see that the spacing of the horizontal lines, or laps, is the same as that of the original).* Synthetic clapboarding in aluminum or vinyl however—although more expensive and no improvement in appearance over wood—is

sometimes used for maintenance reasons because it needs no painting These materials are often blamed for spoiling the character of older houses but it is only fair to point out that it is not the materials themselves but the way in which they are used that is usually the real cause of this. Details such as corner boards and the flat trim round windows and doors are removed in the course of the work and either not replaced, or replaced by thin metal equivalents, which give a totally different expression to the building. *(Anyone who doubts the importance of small details in establishing character should try shaving off his eyebrows!)* If we remember that aluminum and vinyl clapboards are **imitation** materials and never let them do things that wood clapboards couldn't do, however, we can't go too far wrong: they should always run horizontally, for instance, and should not suddenly run vertically over a curved or projecting feature such as a bay or bow window, unless the siding in the original design did; also, they should not run continuously round the corner of a building, but should be trimmed by an adequately-wide corner plate (see sketch).



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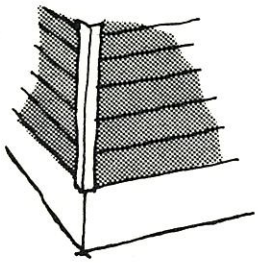

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Generally speaking, when using synthetic clapboards, if the spacing of the horizontal lap lines is kept at about four inches, as in the original wood boards, and if the essential details such as the original flat trim around the windows and doors, and the corner boards, are retained or replaced by something similar, the character of the original design need not be spoiled, as we have already seen.

On the practical side, synthetic clapboards do have certain disadvantages which should also be considered before deciding on their use; aluminum can be dented and scratched quite easily—and permanently—and both aluminum and vinyl can not be painted over successfully. This means that although vinyl may be "final" so is the color of your house, and if a wrong choice is made the results will be around for a long time! Even greater care than usual must be taken, therefore, when selecting colors in these materials. *(See next section.)*

Many houses in Charlestown are covered with wood shingles. Sometimes these were part of the original design but often they were added later over the original clapboards, or in place of them. Although they are a perfectly acceptable building material in themselves, if they have to be removed as part of the rehabilitation of the house it is often best to replace them with clapboards —with, of course, the appropriate detailing as discussed above—unless there is evidence that the house originally had shingles.

The whole range of asphalt and asbestos shingles or siding should generally be avoided if we are interested in preserving the appearance (and the value) of a house. At best, they have a rather cheap and temporary look which can devalue not only the house but the neighborhood. This applies even more to artificial stone and brick sidings which, in addition, make an unsuccessful pretense of being something which they are not.

Use of Color

One of the most important decisions a houseowner may have to make is the choice of exterior colors. This is of particular importance in the case of a wood frame house, where the combination of wall and trim colors usually decides its basic character, making it appear either cheerful or gloomy, light or heavy, restful or "busy," etc. In the case of a brick building, although the basic wall color has already been established, the choice of color for windows, doors, trim, etc., can still have a decisive influence on the character of the exterior.

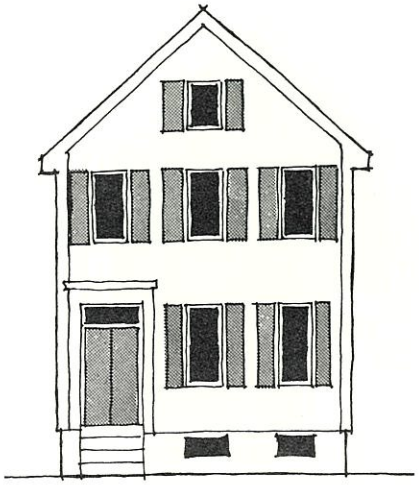
The choosing of colors is a very personal thing but, nevertheless, has its effect on the general character of the street. A good color scheme, therefore, should be neighborly as well as effective in itself, so that both the house and the environment benefit.

Whole books can, and have, been written on the subject of the use of color in buildings but, for present purposes, the following brief suggestions may be of help to the homeowner confronted by the very real problem of having to make a choice from dozens of tiny color samples in paint catalogs:

1/ Do not use too many colors. Oddly enough, the most effective architectural color schemes usually contain a very limited number of real colors—perhaps one or two at the most—many of the elements such as windows, trim, roofing tiles, etc., being in white, grey, or black which are actually non-colors.

2/ If you have a frame house, be very careful in choosing the basic wall color *(especially if using aluminum or vinyl clapboards as already noted).* White *(or rather off-white)* nearly always looks right on a clapboard house, but sometimes a darker-toned color can also be very effective—especially if the window trim is off-white or very light in tone. For this the muted or "natural" colors such as gull-grey, grey-blue, slightly greyed yellow ochre, or brick red, are especially appropriate for the New England climate as they look attractive in all seasons of the year. On the other hand, many of the pastel colors such as pale violets and purples, pale green, and pinks, tend to look slightly discordant without a tropical sky as a backdrop, and often do not relate happily with the rest of the street.

3/ Avoid definite colors when choosing roofing materials which are visible. Often the roof is not thought of as part of the color scheme of a building, and many otherwise effective color combinations have been spoiled by the introduction of green, violet, or pink-tinted asphalt shingles, which turn out to be the straw that breaks the camel's back! Over-colorful roofs also have the undesirable effect of drawing attention away from the more important parts of the building. Neutral grey roofs, on the other hand, will allow a

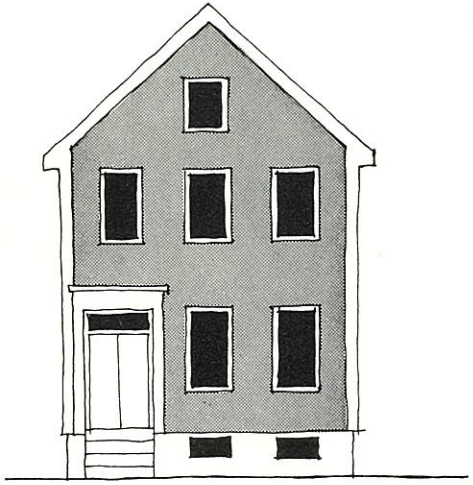


much wider selection of colors on the lower parts of the house—where it really counts—and provide a sort of safety buffer against "over-color." The darker tones of grey, such as charcoal *(which could almost be called off-black),* are particularly effective as a replacement for the traditional slates and look well in themselves, besides combining with almost any color. *(Despite rumors, a dark roof does not seem to draw any significant amount of extra heat into the house in summertime.)*

4/ If in doubt, paint the moving parts of the windows white or off-white. This gives life to the exterior by contrasting with the glazed "hole" of the window which is usually black in effect, and also looks well from the interior, helping to reflect light into the room. It is often also appropriate to follow through by painting the rest of the window, including the outer trim, in white.

5/ Reserve the use of bright colors for elements of maximum importance such as the front door. Although the front door, or doors, may also look attractive in natural or stained wood, if the surface has to be extensively patched or repaired, the most appropriate finish may be a few coats of relatively brightly-colored paint.

When selecting colors for a house it is often difficult to visualize exactly how the color which appears on the small sample in a paint catalog will look when applied to a whole wall, and how it will relate to other contrasting colors or to black and white. Also, such questions arise as whether such items as window trim, corner boards, downspouts, etc., should be painted to match, or to contrast with, the wall, and whether shutters or blinds should be used. One of the best ways to decide these questions and to get a good idea of how the final result will look is to make a simple flat model which roughly resembles the front of the house, out of cardboard or hardboard and to paint it with the intended colors. One of the advantages of such a model over a drawing is that the different parts such as the window trim, eaves, and corner boards can be painted separately and put together afterwards. Also, by making these parts removable, the different effect of painting, say, the window trim white, or the color of the surrounding wall if different, can be compared easily.



In such a model it is not necessary that all the details of the real house be reproduced—only that the areas which might be in different colors be represented roughly in proportion, i.e., that the width and size of the window trim, cornices, corner boards, etc., are approximately right. The paint color, also, must be accurately matched and this, of course, can best be done by using some of the paint to be used on the real house. Sometimes this is only obtainable in gallon cans—rather more than needed for a model—but the houseowner can console himself with the thought that if it proves to be the right color, the rest can be used on the real house and, if not, it was still cheaper to find out this way than by painting the whole building!

For those interested, samples of color models can be seen at the B.R.A. site office at 29 Main Street, and free advice on the use of color can be given by the Rehabilitation Design Department.

Windows

Windows give character to a building in much the same way as the eyes do to a human face and are, therefore, a very important element to be reckoned with when determining what a house is going to look like from outside. It is a good basic rule that, if the original windows cannot be saved and it is necessary to replace them, the new windows should be the same size and type as the originals: in other words, **they should fill the whole aperture.** This is not usually possible when using standard-sized units from a catalog but, if a little extra money is to be spent on a job it couldn't be used in a better way than by buying made-to-measure windows that fit the original openings. (In any case, the difference in price between standard and made-to-measure windows is now often negligible.) The practice of "blocking-up" or "blocking-down" existing window openings to fit a smaller standard window should be avoided, as it does more than any other single thing to change the basic appearance of a building—seldom for the better.

For this reason also, **every effort should be made to keep new ceilings above the level of the heads of existing windows.** Windows are often blocked-down to conceal the edges of lowered ceilings (see Figure 1). If it is considered absolutely necessary to lower a ceiling beyond the window head, some way should be found of retaining the full height of the windows, such as in Figures 2 and 3. Sloping the ceiling at the window is the better method, as it allows more light to enter the room and looks better from the inside, but the solution shown in Figure 3 can also be acceptable if the small vertical face which conceals the lowered edge of the new ceiling is kept as far back as possible from the glass and is painted either black or charcoal grey to make it as invisible as possible from the outside.

There are so many types of windows available on the market that, if windows have to be replaced in an older house, the owner may find himself genuinely confused as to what to select. The following suggestions may be of some help.

The "double-hung" *(or vertically sliding)* window is traditional in Charlestown—as in all New England—and should be first choice when selecting new windows, not only because it looks right in these buildings, but because it usually does the best job of keeping out the weather. Also, at the time that most of the present buildings in Charlestown were built, it was customary to divide each of the moving sashes into two parts by a vertical muntin and, in nine cases out of ten this "two-over-two" window is the correct one to use when restoring the building to its original design. For fuller visibility and ease of maintenance, however, the "one-over-one" type, which has one

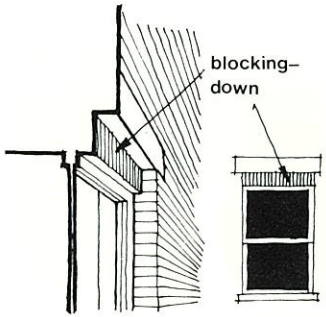


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Figure 1

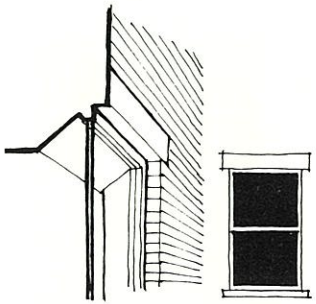

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Figure 2

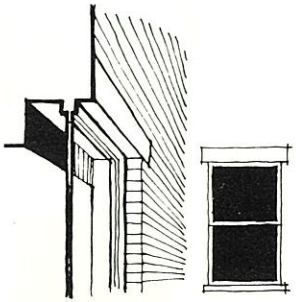

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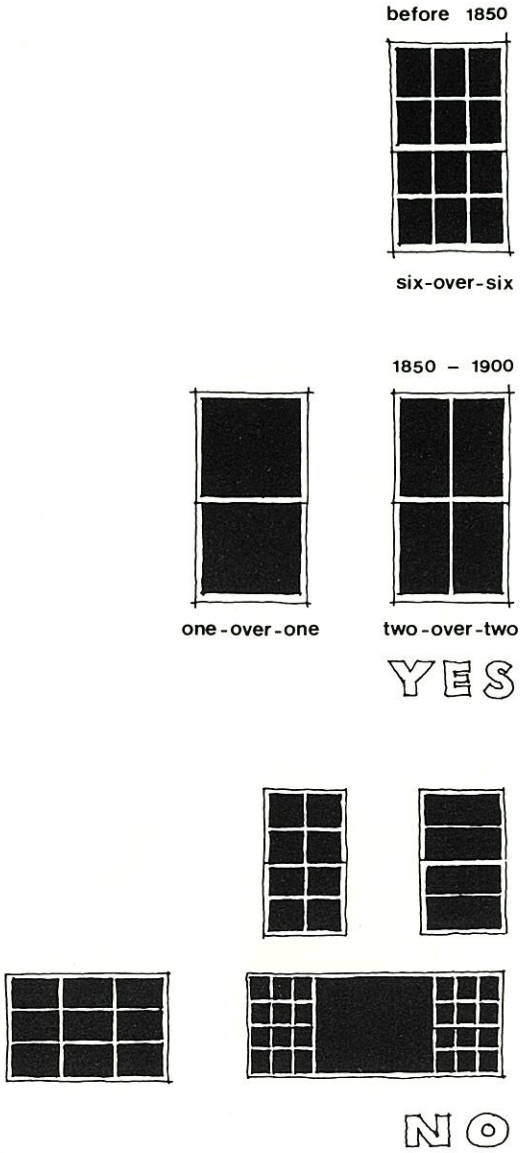
Figure 3



large single pane of glass in each of the moving sashes, is often used when the building is simply being rehabilitated rather than restored. Both of these types are usually appropriate and are shown opposite.

As has been mentioned, there are also a certain number of buildings in the Federal and Greek Revival styles in Charlestown which were built before 1850 and would have had "six-over-six" windows. This type is also shown in the diagram.

It should be pointed out however that, although appropriate in houses built prior to 1850, **"six-over-six" and other small-paned window types should not be used when remodeling or restoring buildings of the latter half of the 19th century.** This is a common way of "dressing-up" buildings to look older than they actually are, and many people find the temptation too hard to resist; nevertheless it should not be done if the integrity of the building is to be respected. *(The type of clip-on subdivisions which are removable for easy cleaning should also not be used, whatever the age of the building if we want it to look genuinely anything, these being pure "fancy-dress" and about as real as a plastic Pilgrim's Hat!)*

The other types of windows shown in the diagram should be avoided completely, being neither of good modern design nor "correct" historically.

The use of storm windows has long been popular as a means of reducing winter fuel bills, and more recently the permanently-fixed aluminum type has become the most popular because it does not require to be put up and taken down in spring and fall, and also doubles as an insect screen in summer. Although not usually improving the appearance of an older house, the use of aluminum storm windows need not necessarily ruin it, and because of the convenience they represent, many homeowners will want to use them. The important thing, however, is that **they should look like part of the house** and not like raw metal appliances as they sometimes do, and to ensure this some simple rules should be followed:

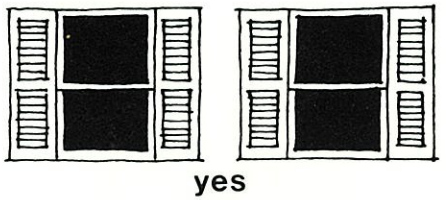
1/The storm window should resemble the inner window as closely as possible in shape and appearance. As most storm windows are "one-over-one" it follows that they look most appropriate when paired with a similar type of window, although a "one-over-one" storm window with a traditional "two-over-two" inner window is still a reasonable compromise. A "one-over-one" storm window over a small-paned window, however, tends to become too much of a contrast visually (and also a rather incongruous mixture of historical styles).

2/The storm window should also match the inner window, and possibly the trim, in color. For this reason "raw" aluminum should be avoided generally as a finish, as it does not blend in with any of the other elements. White, black or bronze anodized finishes are

particularly suitable for brick buildings, whereas white, or off-white, is often the most appropriate choice for a wood frame house where the trim round the windows may be white.

Before leaving the subject of windows a few words must be said about shutters and blinds. *(Both are usually referred to as "shutters," but strictly speaking only those with louvers should be called "blinds.")* Although used nowadays almost exclusively for decorative effect, external blinds – if they really work – are still one of the most effective ways of keeping a room cool by intercepting the sun's rays **before** they reach the glass of the window – a fact which may prove useful in certain locations. Whether they actually hinge or not, however, if we are to use shutters or blinds it is of the greatest importance to the appearance of the house that **they should look as if they could work** – in other words, that they would be big enough to cover the entire window if closed. The ones shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4 do not do this and, like other forms of obvious architectural untruths, are to be avoided.

Another point about shutters and blinds is that, unless the width of wall between the windows is at least that of the windows themselves, they cannot be used (see Figure 1). Otherwise, if there is plenty of wall space in relation to window, the appearance of the house may be enhanced by the use of shutters or blinds, if they are properly sized and reasonably "authentic."



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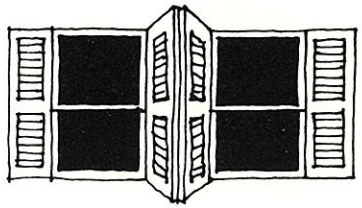

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Figure 1

Doorways

Part of the unique character of Charlestown is due to the fact that, unlike many other areas of the city, most buildings have their street fronts directly in line with the sidewalk with no setback, this giving a certain continuity to the streets however varied the house fronts may be individually. Also, most houses have the main doors facing the street, with a short flight of steps running up to them beginning directly on the sidewalk line, making, in effect, a recessed entrance. These recesses are very much part of the street design and give interest to what might otherwise be a series of flat and rather dull frontages. Sometimes the recesses are "plugged-up," however, by the later addition of a sort of storm door on the sidewalk line with a piece of wall around it which, apart from producing something of a "boarded-up" effect and making the street more monotonous, are also hazardous as the door must swing outward into the sidewalk with the risk of striking passers-by. Two of the reasons for building these outer door-walls seem to be to conserve heat within the building in winter and to discourage vagrants from using the steps in the milder seasons, but both these objectives can be accomplished in other and simpler ways – by good weather stripping around the front doors and by good overhead lighting on the steps. Good lighting, apart from improving the appearance of the street, may also prove to be safer than an unlocked "plug-door" as it provides no concealed lurking places.

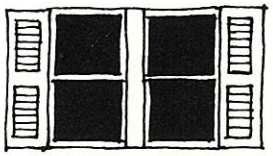

Figure 2

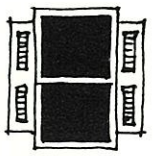

Figure 3

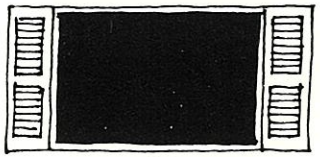

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Figure 4

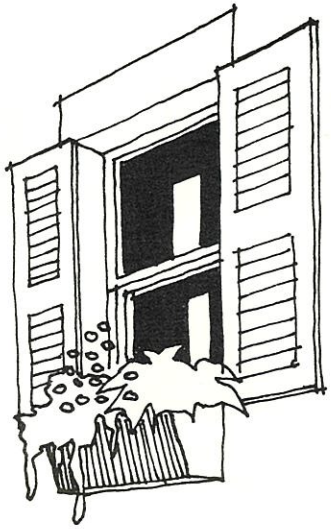
Storm doors mounted at the head of the steps have not been suggested as a means of conserving heat, because they have to swing outward over the steps and are therefore also a form of hazard. If one is to be used, however, the same suggestions will apply as to storm windows, anodized or baked-on colors being preferable to raw aluminum as a finish.

Again, **nothing looks better than the original door, or doors,** at the head of the steps and so every effort should be made to save them, and refinish them if necessary. A wide range of finishes is possible, from clean or stained natural wood to relatively bright colored paints – although very glossy finishes should be avoided, as they reflect too much light and detract from the effect of the color or wood grain, and also show up every minute imperfection on the surface of the door.

Planting

No discussion of ways to improve buildings and neighborhoods would be complete without some mention of one of the most important details of all – planting. The presence of well-selected living green trees, shrubs or plants – whether growing from the ground, in planters or in window boxes – probably does more than any other single thing to improve the appearance of both house and street.

In Charlestown, where most of the buildings are directly on the sidewalk, the most effective impact which can be made on the street side – other than by the encouragement of municipal tree-planting programs – is by the use of window boxes. This is certainly one of the quickest, most effective, and least expensive ways for the private individual to enhance his house and street at the same time and, in fact, so successful has it been in some cities that whole areas have become transformed almost overnight by the popularization of the window box, which has become a sort of symbol of pride and faith in the neighborhood leading to the remodelling or restoration of many of the houses.



A good window box can be made quite simply and inexpensively, but it must be durable, properly drained, and securely attached to the house. Natural redwood, oiled or otherwise preserved, is a particularly suitable material, being resistant to moisture and having a pleasant color which blends well with the surroundings. For safety and convenience it is suggested that the plants be separately potted in inner containers instead of the whole box being filled with earth, this helping to reduce the weight of the whole unit and the strain on the sides of the box besides making it simple to remove any or all of the plants in winter time.

The possibilities of attractive planting in the private spaces behind, or even between, the houses should not be overlooked however, and there are often unique opportunities of making something very attractive out of even the smallest space: a living room or dining room at ground level, for instance, can be made to open on to a small private patio or garden, and a larger window used

than would be appropriate on the front of the house. Often, all that is necessary to transform a drab area into an attractive and useful space is a little imagination, some brick or concrete paving, some greenery, and – if there is room – a shade tree.

Lastly, for satisfactory results, it is important in all cases to select the right type of trees, shrubs, and plants which will thrive both in Charlestown and in the particular location where they are to be planted – whether it be sunny, partly sunny, or with no sun. Below is a suggested list of possible choices.

LARGE SHADE OR STREET TREES:

Amur Corktree Little-leaf Linden London Planetree Sargent Cherry
Scarlet Oak Thornless Honeylocust Zelkova 'Village Green'

MEDIUM SIZE SHADE TREES:

American Yellow-wood Chinese Scholartree Fringetree Sourwood

TREES FOR NARROW AREAS:

Bradford Callery Pear Columnar Norway Maple Katsura Tree
Maidenhair Tree – Ginkgo Biloba (Male)

FLOWERING TREES:

Dogwood Downy Shadblow – Amelanchier Flowering Cherries Flowering Crabapples
Saucer Magnolia

DECIDUOUS & FLOWERING SHRUBS:

Azalea Cotoneaster Forsythia Japanese Quince Rose Bushes Winged Evonymus

EVERGREEN SHRUBS:

American Yew Azalea Japanese Holly Rhododendron Spreading English Yew

VINES:

Boston Ivy Chinese Fleece Vine Hardy English Ivy Virginia Creeper

ANNUAL – SUMMER BEDDING – POTTING PLANTS

Coleus Geraniums Marguerites Marigolds Patience Plant Petunias Tobacco Plant
Wax Begonia

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