

Memo to the Newburyport Zoning Board of Appeals

From: the Newburyport Historical Commission

The Newburyport Planning Office requested that the Newburyport Historical Commission (NHC) review the history, significance and other details of 17-21 State Street, also known simply as “Fowle’s,” in order to provide useful background information to the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) to inform its deliberation on the application for a variance sought for relief from certain provisions of the ordinance controlling proposed changes within the Downtown Overlay District (DOD).

It is our understanding that an applicant wishes to alter the historic storefront by replacing the storefront plate glass windows with windows that differ significantly in both appearance and operability, changes which are specifically prohibited under the DOD ordinance. At the conclusion of our research and deliberations, we determined that this proposal would permanently destroy the unique historic character of the facade, and recommend that a variance **not be granted**.

Our recommendation is based on the specific characteristics of this particular structure and the guidance provided in the Standards and Preservation Briefs published by the U. S. Dept. of the Interior. The DOD ordinance specifies that the Secretary of the Interior standards “shall be” followed, and we have found that in this case:

1. The storefront is a rare and excellent example of “Art Moderne” design. It is not an exaggeration to say it has long been a local landmark.
2. The physical condition of the storefront is not deteriorated beyond repair - far from it; and this is the only condition that warrants replacement.
3. Creative restoration of the storefront would create a greater economic asset - to both the subject property and to our downtown generally - than renovation into a contemporary design.

About the building

The Fowle’s building is listed as “contributory” to the Newburyport Historic District and is documented in a “Form B” created by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Our investigation, and consultation with the national expert on structural glass storefronts, discovered an error in the Form B: the sign band area (the large off-white area on the building just above the windows) is not metal, but “Carrera” structural glass. [Note: The applicant’s plans refer to the black structural glass as “granite,” which is also an error.] This tinted structural glass, along with the plate glass windows and the Art Deco lettering work together as part of a coherent design, installed 80 years ago. The storefront has retained this design, essentially unchanged, for some 80 years, longer than any prior incarnations. It is one of very few downtown storefronts unaltered during the renovations of the ‘urban renewal’ era. The structural glass is rare, valuable, and in need of only minor rehabilitation; it, together with the large display windows, are key elements of the overall design which was documented for the purpose of preservation.

NB. Three panels of the Carrera glass signage were reportedly lost during a hurricane and were replaced with some type of plastic with applied lettering – the ones which have not faded. The original panels clearly show how the letters were not simply painted on, but etched into the glass surface for permanence. There are also one or two pieces of the black structural glass that have been replaced by what appears to be sheet metal or aluminum.

Aside from destroying the harmony of the design, there is a definite probability that any attempt to change the windows would imperil the structural glass panels which are permanently adhered to the brick facade.

In short, the Fowle’s storefront represents a distinctive and iconic design that is documented as an important historical asset to our city which must not be altered by the replacement of the large plate

glass with divided light windows contrary to need, contrary to the DOD ordinance, and contrary to well established principles of historic preservation. An approach inspired by creative restoration and rehabilitation is clearly what is appropriate in this case.

Application of the relevant standards

As stated above, the NHC relies on the standards and interpretive bulletins published by the U. S. Dept. of the Interior. One of our primary sources was Preservation Brief 11 - "Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts," which states the preferred approach in no uncertain terms:

"A key to the successful rehabilitation of historic commercial buildings is the sensitive treatment of the first floor itself. Wherever possible, significant storefronts (be they original or later alterations), including windows, sash, doors, transoms, signs and decorative features, should be repaired in order to retain the historic character of the building... The sensitive rehabilitation of historic storefronts will not only enhance the architectural character of the overall building but will contribute to rejuvenating neighborhoods or business districts as well."

"If the original or significant storefront exists, repair and retain the historic features using recommended treatments."

Note that this guidance specifically includes "later alterations" which have become historic. We know that the current storefront is not "original" to the structure, which is much older. However, due to its sophisticated design and execution – not to mention its own age – it is now "historic" in its own right and fully deserving of preservation. The Preservation Brief states:

"In evaluating whether the existing storefront is worthy of preservation, recognize that good design can exist in any period; a storefront added in 1930 may have greater architectural merit than what it replaced. In commercial historic districts, it is often the diversity of styles and detailing that contribute to the character; removing a storefront dating from 1910 simply because other buildings in the district have been restored to their 1860's appearance may not be the best preservation approach. If the storefront design is a good example of its period and if it has gained significance over time, it should be retained as part of the historical evolution of the building (this architectural distinctiveness could also be an economic asset as it may attract attention to the building.)"

We also know that the "use" of the property has changed, eliminating the newsstand and concentrating on food service. The brief addresses this situation:

"Preserve the storefront's character even though there is a new use on the interior. If less exposed window area is desirable, consider the use of interior blinds and insulating curtains rather than altering the existing historic fabric." and "Avoid use of materials that were unavailable when the storefront was constructed..."

After reviewing the standards and how they apply to this case, there is no question that the storefront must be preserved.

Requirement of a hardship

Of course it is the responsibility of the ZBA and not the NHC to evaluate the whether or not a hardship exists, but the subject inevitably came up during our discussion. It was pointed out that other downtown restaurants have done well for many years despite fixed windows. Also, the new sidewalk and street seating now provide opportunities for dining in the open air and for gaining the attention of potential customers with umbrellas and the like. Perhaps more importantly, doesn't it stand to reason that if you can find 'hip' restaurants in most any city, wouldn't it be far better – in terms of marketing savvy - to create a great dining experience within a well-known, beloved and beautifully preserved local landmark?

Respectfully submitted,

Glenn Richards, Chair, Newburyport Historical Commission