



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT  
HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
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## DOD Historical Report

Meeting Date 13 February, 2020  
Property Address 93 State Street  
Applicant Institution for Savings; Atty. Lisa Mead, MTC

**Project description:** Build a 2-story addition to the existing structure, with parking on the ground level and office space on upper story.

**Plan(s) of Record:** Letter and exhibits submitted by Atty. Mead on 6 Feb. 2020; plans from Meridian Associates dated 8 January, 2020; and plans from Woodman Associates dated 6 January 2020.

### **Significance of the historic building/structure proposed for demolition:**

This project does not call for demolition of historic building fabric or features. There may be some demolition of the 1980 addition as required to integrate the proposed structure.

### **The relative importance of such historic building/structure to its setting within the District:**

It's hard to overstate the contribution that the original (1872) building makes to the upper State Street locale, and by extension, our city. It is indeed a rare gem, because examples of this architectural style, executed to such a high level in a commercial building, and preserved with care in both its exterior and interior, are both very rare and very valuable. One speaker at our meeting called it the most beautiful in the city, and I think many would agree.

### **Recommendations to SPGA:**

The proposed plans present challenges, without a doubt. The applicant desires to expand available space in a very major way, adding a structure which is larger than the historic (1872) structure which is the primary 'face' of the property, seen from State Street. Additionally, they have the difficult task of creating an addition which is **compatible** with the historic building, yet is **differentiated** from it, so as not to appear the same age. It turns out

that while differentiation is easy, compatibility is much harder – especially in this case where we are dealing with an example of the Italianate style executed to an extreme.

The proposed design certainly accomplishes the goal of **differentiation** – it would never be mistaken for a late 19<sup>th</sup> century building. **Compatibility** with the existing building, its lot, and *its setting within the DOD*, however, is a different matter, and where this proposal faces significant challenges.

**It is therefore the determination of the commission that the applicant should undertake a thorough review and redesign of the proposed project with two goals: better complementarity with the historic (1872) structure, and improved massing, as discussed below.**

### **Detailed Review**

The ordinance prescribing what is and is not permitted in the Downtown Overlay District (DOD) states that “*New construction within the DOD shall not disrupt the essential form and integrity of the subject historic building...structure, the lot where it is located, or its setting within the DOD...New construction shall be compatible with the size, scale, height, color, material and character of the subject historic building...lot where it is located, and its setting within the DOD.*” When viewed from State Street, the proposed addition recedes into the background because of its distance from that vantage point. However, as one travels down Prospect Street toward Otis Place, the addition quickly grows into a looming, monolithic giant that is clearly not subordinate to the existing building, even if one includes the 1980 addition. The efforts to reflect, or make reference to, stylistic elements of the original building are token, and measures to minimize the impact of the proposed structure on its “setting” along Prospect Street and Otis Place are minimal and not very effective.

There are many architectural techniques commonly used to reduce the apparent size of a structure and to mitigate what would otherwise be a visually overwhelming mass. Basically, they comprise various ways of breaking down a large, otherwise flat plane into smaller segments. Doing so adds visual interest while simultaneously making the mass appear to be less, or at least less overbearing, than it actually is.

**NOTE:** The intention of the commission with this report is to provide examples and illustrations of architectural treatments that are used here in Newburyport to reduce apparent massing and echo period style elements in contemporary buildings. They are only illustrations, not recommendations.

Other than by the obvious placement of windows and doors, masses may also be broken down, or divided, by introducing horizontal and vertical ‘interruptions’ to what begins as a flat wall. These include window treatments (projecting sills, lintels, etc.), bands of contrasting color or texture, and areas that are either recessed below, or raised above, the primary surface.

The Newburyport Police Headquarters on Green Street illustrates several of these techniques (*see Illustration 1*):

- A central ‘pavilion’ is set off by vertical pilasters of brick. These quasi-columns also include a sequence of simulated blocks or quoins, with rectangular sections of brick

set proud (forward) of the primary plane. Similar quoins also appear on the corners of the building.

- At the level of the ground floor, there is a large horizontal band of concrete, above which the wall continues upward set back slightly, a bit like a column on a pedestal.
- At the second story level, a band of bricks is set vertically (a “soldier course”) and projects outward from the plane of the wall. This forms another prominent horizontal line and shadow to interrupt or punctuate the vertical plane of the wall, providing some visual relief to the otherwise flat plane.



*Illustration 1: Police Headquarters building, Green St. Newburyport.*

It should be noted that the implementation of a central ‘pavilion’ that projects from the main wall, prominent vertical pilasters, and quoins at the corners are all prominent features of the historic 1872 Institution for Savings building, where they are executed in brownstone, of course. It would be appropriate to acknowledge those features in the proposed addition, adapted to contemporary materials and methods. Including such ‘nods to the past’ or references to the original historic building are ways in which an addition is made to be more “compatible” with the primary structure. It is disappointing to see that the proposed addition takes advantage of none of these techniques, with the possible exception of quoins, which are mentioned for only a single corner, and even there they will be hardly visible because they are not to be set so as to project beyond the plane of the wall, but are only brick set in a different orientation. Use of bricks of a different color is another possible alternative to giving them greater visual impact.

In another (relatively) recent local building, part of the Immaculate Conception church complex on High Street across from Bartlet Mall, some of these same techniques are used. (See *Illustration 2*.)

Here you can see the same concept of a central pavilion that projects forward of the main façade, and quoins on the corners. Here, the latter are executed in concrete rather than brick, making for greater contrast against the brick and giving them greater visual prominence. The overall height impact of this building is also somewhat diminished by situating the third floor within the roof area, supplemented by dormers. Given the predominantly rectilinear design of the bank, which has a flat roof, a pitched roof may not be appropriate in the case of 93 State Street, but there may be other ways to provide sufficient interior office space without such a hulking exterior.



*Illustration 2: Immaculate Conception Building on High Street*

The ground level of the proposed structure at 93 State Street, which is for parking, shows improvements to the grates of the large openings compared to the original plans. But they are recessed, and nearly the same color as the brick, so they are not as effective as the grates used in the new municipal parking garage at Merrimack and Titcomb Streets, for example. (See *Illustration 3*.) Notice that the public garage also used a band of darker colored brickwork, and window treatments, including projecting sills and large lintels, all using contrasting colors, to further break up the mass. The design of the windows also makes reference to the many “six over six” windows in Newburyport, even though they are only grates over an open space. This improves its overall “compatibility” with its environs. The proposed structure doesn’t even have those treatments for **real** windows on the second floor; rather, they are large blank spaces, which give a kind of ‘vacant stare,’ hollowed-out look.



*Illustration 3: Newburyport Municipal Garage*

Finally, the placement of an enclosed glass atrium-like area on the Otis Place elevation, while similar in style to a feature of the 1980 addition, looks out of place here. It reads as overly 'modern' within the context of the surrounding late 19<sup>th</sup> century dwellings, which it borders very closely. It would be nice to see a more appropriate way of accomplishing the desired set-back; something more in keeping with a contemporary take on the Italianate style than simply a repeat of a feature in the 1980 addition.

Submitted 18 February, 2020

Glenn Richards, Chair  
Newburyport Historical Commission