



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
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***DRAFT* DOD Advisory/Historical Report**

Meeting Date 14 July, 2022
Property Address 24 Merrimack St / “Market Landing Park”
Applicant Andrew Port, Planning Director, City of Newburyport
Project description Construct new visitor center and bathroom facility, and new parking and landscape configuration within the existing municipal park within the bounds of the Downtown Overlay District
Plan(s) of Record: Application and documents posted under **PBSP-22-6** on the City of Newburyport web site.

Significance of the historic building/structure and the locale

Normally a report would discuss the historic structure to be demolished or modified, but in this case, there is no such structure on the site; whatever structures that had been there had already been demolished some 50 years ago or more. At present, the site houses only ‘temporary’ structures of no historic significance. The demolition of these current structures in favor of permanent structures would be (or should be) a positive development.

The site, however, is very historically significant, being located along the Merrimack River in the heart of downtown, within what is now “Market Landing Park.” This park was created from the empty landscape created during the “urban renewal” of downtown Newburyport, just West of the Firehouse and Market Square. Photographs of this area taken before urban renewal show commercial buildings on this lot of varied descriptions and materials, generally in poor condition. There were also newer structures, like a gas station, that came to be seen as undesirable intrusions that did not complement the historic setting that had not yet been destroyed by economic decay or events such as fires.

Older photographs, taken when the city’s economy was robust, show a dense collection of buildings dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. The neighborhood was very commercial, housing businesses of many kinds. There was considerable variety of structures, one might say a hodgepodge, with many sizes, styles and building materials in evidence. Similarly, there was a wide variety of uses, from manufacturing to millwork to retail and wholesale suppliers.

The renewal of this district brought a dramatic change to its character, and it is now heavily focussed on tourism and recreational activities. The dense collection of commercial structures is gone, replaced in this location by open space transformed into “Market Landing Park” and parking.

The Commission listened to the presentation of the project by Director Port and reviewed the architectural plans. While the use of the space for a visitor center is certainly consistent with the contemporary setting, and replacing the temporary facilities was favorably regarded, I regret to write that the Commission was not impressed with the architectural design.

We would have expected a contemporary design; that is appropriate. But there was general disappointment that the design did not appear to incorporate any design features that might make reference to the history of the locale, such as elements that might reflect the shipbuilding industry or other activities that occupied this site in the past. In essence, the board perceived the design as innocuous, but generic. This is especially disappointing given the very prominent and visible location.

Possibly the design was handicapped from the start by budget and geographical constraints, and perhaps even more so by the need to satisfy the requirements – or preferences – of too many people. As often happens in such a case, the effort to avoid displeasing anyone results in a design that at least one member described as “boring.” Others agreed it was uninspired, and did not complement the historic locale even if it did provide a needed function. Interestingly, a page of “Context and Precedent” images was presented, illustrating designs of structures often found in this neighborhood or in nearby residential areas; but the proposed structure does not bear any resemblance to any of those examples.

Conclusion

The major task of the Historical Commission in this case is to consider whether “the requested use will not impair the integrity or character of the district or adjoining districts, nor be detrimental to the health or welfare.”

Clearly, there is no detriment to health or welfare; this would almost certainly improve. But the sentiment from the commission, while generally supportive of the removal of the temporary structures, does not support a finding that there would be no adverse impact on “the integrity or character of the district or adjoining districts.” Members saw the design as so incongruous with its surroundings as to make it stand out – but not in a good way.

Glenn Richards, Chair, Newburyport Historical Commission