



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
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DOD Supplemental Report

Meeting Date 28 January, 2021
Property Address 93 State Street
Applicant Institution for Savings; Atty. Lisa Mead, MTC

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

Plan(s) of Record: For this report, we refer to the plans submitted on 7 January, 2021:
“[Architectural plans](#)” (ifs_-01-04-2021_historic_com_final_arc.pdf).
“[Presentation for 1/14/21 \(part 1\)](#)” (ifs_-01-04-2021_historic_com_part_1.pdf)

Purpose of this fourth supplemental report:

On 14 January, 2021, the Newburyport Historical Commission (NHC) heard a presentation of revised plans from the applicant’s attorney and architect. We also took public comments and deliberated as to whether these latest plans provide a basis for changing our prior finding(s) that the project does not conform to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards (“the Standards”).

The applicant requested that we provide another Advisory Report for the Planning Board based on the new design; this is the fourth report prepared for this project. This draft was reviewed on 28 January and approved by the board with some amendments from the original draft.

Executive Summary

The latest plans reflect significant and laudable efforts to reduce the impression of size, scale and/or “massing,” as compared to the three prior designs. Sadly, the fact (versus the appearance) of excessive mass remains: the eave height of the proposed building – the characteristic with the most influence on the impression of height, in our opinion – remains unchanged, and the footprint is much larger than the historic building. Also, in reverting to a more commercial architectural design of brick and stone, the proposed building is more dissonant with its immediate setting than the prior design.

For these reasons, the commission finds that the proposed design does not conform to the Secretary’s Standards, and therefore cannot recommend that a Special Permit be granted.

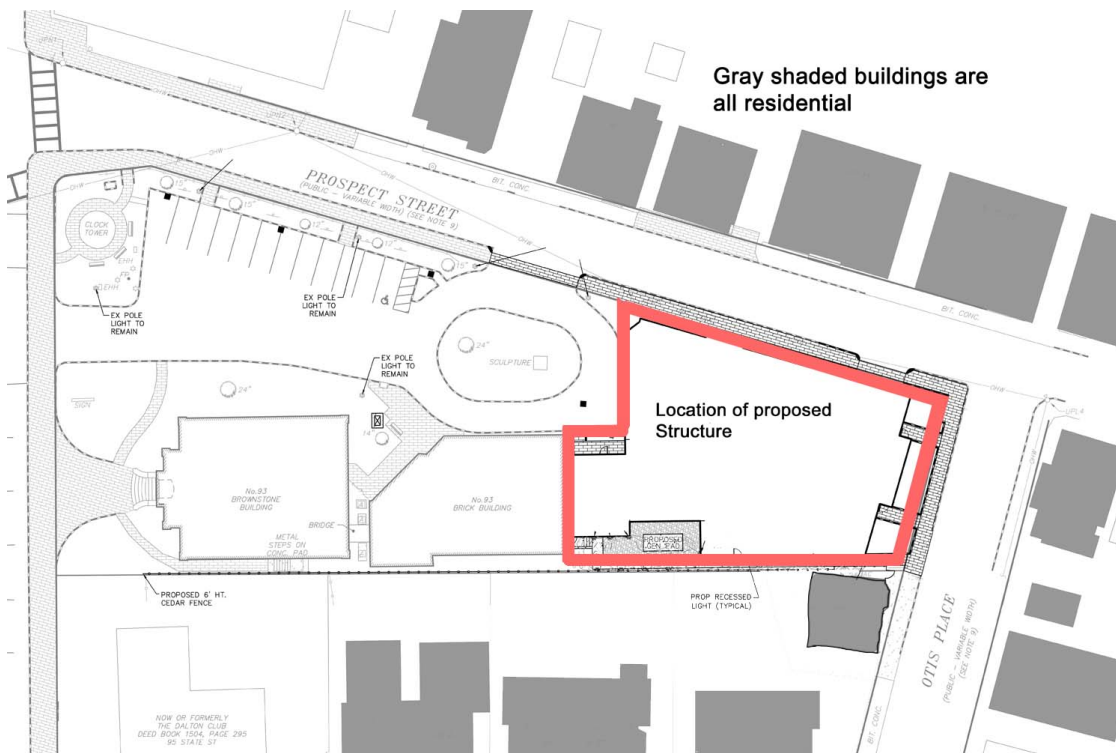
Role of the Newburyport Historical Commission

The Downtown Overlay District (DOD) ordinance (XXVII-F -3.a.) requires compliance with “any relevant provisions of the United States Secretary of the Interior’s Standards as they may be amended from time to time, including all related guidelines, bulletins and other official guidance promulgated by the National Park Service.” The NHC is tasked with evaluating whether or not proposed projects adhere to the provisions of that ordinance and the Standards, which we strive do as fairly and objectively as we can. To do this, we put aside our personal preferences or architectural tastes, as well as any opinions we may have about an applicant, which in this case is a well-known and respected member of our community. The NHC does not take a position “for” or “against” any project; we only try to fulfill our obligation to make and report our determinations based on our evaluation of the applicant’s plans.

Challenges inherent to this project

The primary, historic structure for this application is 93 State Street, the Institution for Savings building, dating to 1870. When it was built, it was the only commercial structure on the block bounded by State, Prospect and Garden Streets, and Otis place. Over time, State Street became almost exclusively commercial, the bank purchased several surrounding lots, and the formerly residential block was re-zoned as commercial. However, all the other structures on and around the block have remained residential. Therefore, it is very difficult to create a design, commercial in function, yet in harmony with both its residential neighbors and the historic bank building.

Over the course of the many hearings on this project, the NHC has devoted a lot of attention to the relationship of the proposed structure with the residential neighborhood, perhaps even more than its relationship to the historic structure on State St. This is because the location of the proposed structure is far to the rear of the lot, behind another addition and significantly distant from State St. Here, all the abutting structures are residential (see image below), while the distance lends an impression that the proposed structure is not an integral part of the historic structure.



Overview showing the location of the proposed structure

A further challenge is created by the need to comply with city parking ordinances for commercial buildings. As noted in prior reports, the decision to incorporate all required parking on site, using a mechanical, tiered parking system, requires the second floor to be much higher than normal, which in turn raises the height of the proposed structure. As detailed in earlier reports, this unusual height is a major concern because it so uncharacteristic of neighboring structures.

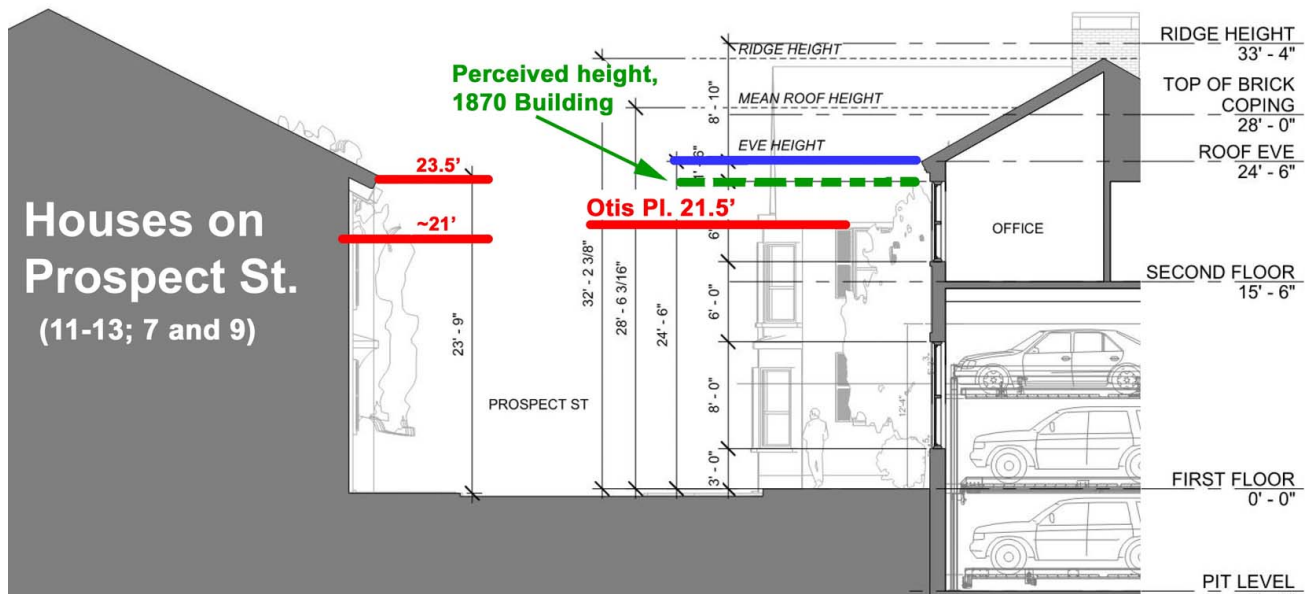
Does the proposed project conform to the Secretary's standards?

The Commission believes that the proposed design does **not** adhere to the standards, due to incompatibility with the neighborhood context and insufficient "subordination" to both the historic building and its setting. Newburyport's DOD ordinance 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." *[emphasis added]*

Compatibility with the setting

The “material and character” of the design is appropriate for a commercial building, and would not present an issue in a normal commercial setting. But on this site, surrounded on three sides with wood clad residential structures, the presence of a large brick edifice presents a jarring contrast. The contrast is amplified by the unusual height of the first story – much higher than a residential building or even a conventional commercial building. As explained previously, this is necessary due to the planned parking system. This system pushes the eave height significantly higher than usual; about a foot higher than the highest eave nearby, and even higher than others. The setback from the street reduces the impression of height, but they are uncharacteristic of the setting, where structures are set back very little if at all. Also, reducing the roof pitch may help lessen the impression of height and mass, but at the expense of harmony with neighboring structures, which tend to have a significantly steeper pitch. These steeper roofs, along with wider footprints, explain why these abutting structures have a higher ridge than the proposed structure despite having lower eaves. The applicant seems to prefer to focus on “mean roof height,” which, in this case, reduces the height difference, because a steeper roof will have a higher mean height than a shallower roof.

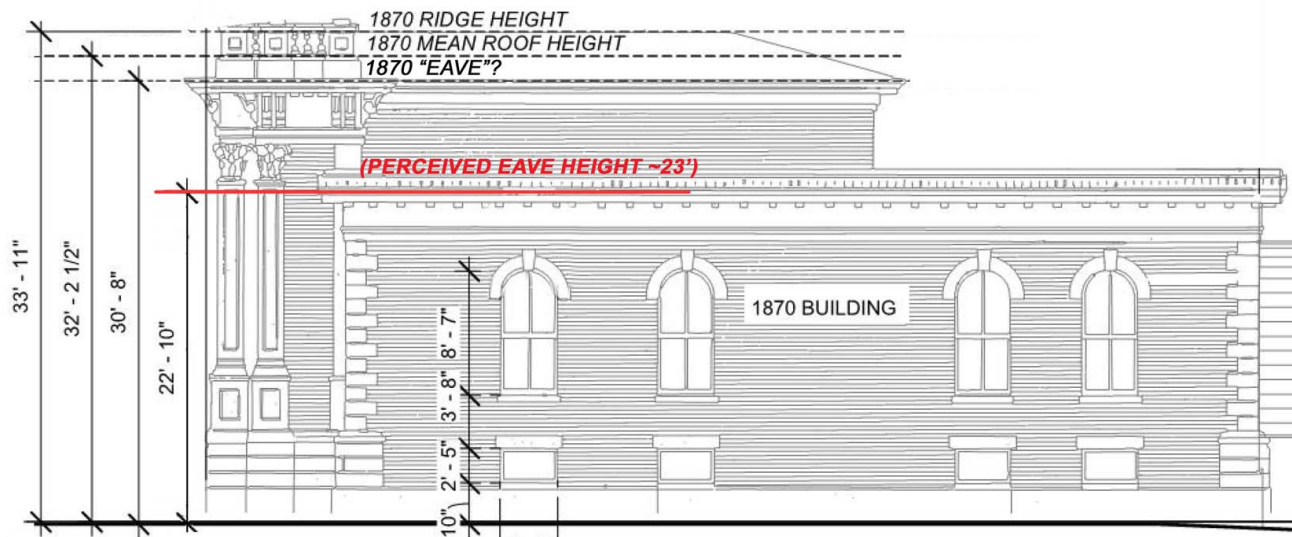
The image below illustrates eave height comparisons along Prospect St. The 21’ line represents the approximate eave height for 7 or 9 Prospect St.; the blue line represents the proposed structure, and the green line shows the “perceived height” of the historic 1870 building, explained below.



The applicant has argued that ‘historical patterns of development’ exist in Newburyport, including within the DOD, where large commercial buildings were built among older residential structures. We leave it to the Planning board to accept this argument for justification for the construction of a large commercial building embedded among residences, or, rather, to conclude that the purpose of the DOD ordinance is to discourage such development as undesirable.

Relationship to the historic building

The applicant has determined that the “mean roof height” of the 1870 building is over 32 ft. This figure is based on the eave and roof height of the central pavilion section of the historic building, not the major part of that buildings massing, which is considerably lower. Especially as one approaches, coming up State Street, the central portion strikes the viewer as an elaborate and impressive frontispiece that rises above the main body of the building. The illustration on the next page shows how the eave height of the building may justifiably be considered as that of the lower part of the building, about 23 ft. If one accepts this 23ft. figure, then the proposed building is about 1-1/2 ft. higher at the eave, and 10 ft. taller at the ridge – hardly “subordinate.”



Further, the plan views of the lot make it clear that the proposed building is larger – dramatically so – than the 1870 building. While the distance from the 1870 structure may mitigate these adverse factors somewhat, it does not eliminate them. Therefore we conclude that the design is not subordinate to the historic structure, as required by ordinance.

Summary and Conclusion

The issue of excessive mass has been improved with this redesign, but not eliminated. At the same time, other aspects of design which bear upon how well the proposal harmonizes with its locale are not necessarily improvements. The brick design is more harmonious with the historical structure, but makes a strong contrast with the more immediate locale. This neighborhood locale, as stated in previous reports, is considered worthy of note and preservation by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, as they documented in a “Form G” report. This reinforces the need to take very seriously the impact of this project on this location.

Regarding the relationship of the proposed structure to the historic building, the proposal still departs from the standards because its overall massing (footprint and height) is inappropriately larger than the historic building. The proposed location, far back on the lot, may make the structure appear less overwhelming, but only from State Street – not from Prospect Street or Otis Place.

Therefore it is the determination of the commission that the proposed design has come closer to compliance with the Secretary’s standards, but still falls short, and therefore we cannot recommend that a Special Permit be granted based on this design.

Respectfully submitted, 29 January, 2021

Glenn Richards, Chair
 Newburyport Historical Commission