

POLICY GOVERNING INSTALLATION OF SYNTHETIC MATERIALS AT HISTORICALLY-DESIGNATED SITES IN CAMBRIDGE

Despite longstanding practices favoring the use of traditional materials in designated buildings in Cambridge, the deterioration in quality of commonly available lumber and increased rainfall and humidity associated with global warming are such that continued insistence on the use of natural materials in exposed locations could be considered a hardship for property owners. The following guidelines have been adopted by the Cambridge Historical Commission for the information of property owners and to guide staff in the issuance of Certificates of Appropriateness or Nonapplicability for conforming installations.

The Cambridge Historical Commission allows synthetic replacements for trim details that are in ground contact (like porch skirt boards and step risers) or exposed to the weather (like rooftop balustrades or porch railings with no roof over them). Cellular PVC (as produced by Azek and other manufacturers) comes in many traditional profiles and common lumber sizes. With a matte finish that can (and should) be painted, it can be indistinguishable from wood. Domestic lumber today bears no resemblance to the old-growth stock that was available until the 1940s and '50s. Exotic hardwoods may answer for the time being, but they are expensive to source and may not be environmentally sustainable in the long term.

The Commission also approves synthetics for in-kind fence replacements. Such replacements will be considered appropriate when fabricated to be functionally and visually indistinguishable from wood. Synthetic materials with reflective surfaces shall not be allowed under any circumstances.

The Commission also allows wood gutters to be replaced with copper or fiberglass as long as the profile matches the existing (or original) profile. This is allowed a) because wood gutters available today do not offer the longevity of old-growth stock and b) because wood gutters are inherently undersized for all but the smallest roof surfaces. This mismatch of capacity vs. demand, combined with the propensity of narrow outlets to clog with the slightest obstruction, leads to destructive overflows and consequent deterioration of fascia, soffits, and siding. The same exterior dimension in a 4" x 5" (nominal) thin-walled metal or fiberglass gutter will have over three times the capacity of an equivalent wood gutter.

The Commission does not permit K-style gutters (the familiar flat-bottomed aluminum gutter profile) as replacements unless they were original to the building, but copper or fiberglass gutters in an appropriate profile preserve or recapture the traditional appearance of a cornice while offering measurable benefits in efficient capture of rainwater. These materials offer homeowners greater longevity and lower demands for maintenance.

CONTACT THE HISTORICAL COMMISSION FOR MORE INFORMATION

Commission staff may issue Certificates of Appropriateness or Nonapplicability for synthetic replacements that match existing or original details. Staff may refer questionable cases to the Commission for further review.

CHC staff are always available to advise on appropriate installation of synthetic materials, whether or not the property is designated as a landmark or located in a district.

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