



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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November 24, 2021

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan, Executive Director

Re: Revised Design Guidelines for 727 Massachusetts Ave. (Cambridge Gas-Light Co. building)

The Commission voted on September 2 to initiate a landmark designation study of 727 Massachusetts Avenue, the Cambridge Gas-Light Company building. This initiated a one-year period of interim jurisdiction over publicly-visible exterior alterations while staff prepares a designation study for consideration by the Commission and the City Council.

On October 6 the Commission heard the owner's request for a Certificate of Appropriateness for an addition recently approved by the Cambridge Planning Board. In the course of discussion commissioners and members of the public noted the difficulty of evaluating the applicant's proposal in the absence of the design guidelines that normally emerge during a landmark designation study. With the owner's consent, the Commission voted to continue the hearing for sixty days to allow the staff to prepare design guidelines for review on November 4 and for further consideration of the owner's application on December 2.

On November 4 CHC staff presented a memo discussing the Cambridge Historical Commission's standards for review, an excerpt from the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, and a draft of possible standards for review for the Gas-Light Building. Following an extended discussion by commissioners and members of the public, staff revised the draft standards for further discussion on December 2. Once the standards have been adopted the Commission will resume the continued hearing on the proposed alterations to the building.

Attachment

## VII. Proposed Standards for Review of Alterations and Additions at the Cambridge Gas-Light Company building, 727 Massachusetts Avenue

Under the neighborhood conservation district and landmark designation ordinance, Ch. 2.78, Art. III, the Historical Commission is charged with reviewing all construction, demolition or alterations that affects the exterior architectural features (other than color) of a designated landmark. This section of the report describes exterior architectural features that are among the characteristics that led to consideration of the property as a landmark. Except as the Order designating or amending the landmark may otherwise provide, the exterior architectural features described in this report should be preserved and/or enhanced in any proposed alteration or construction that affects those features of the landmark.

The following standards for review provide guidance for consideration of applications for Certificates of Appropriateness for alterations to the landmark described in this report. The standards are not intended to be either prescriptive or comprehensive; the Commission must use its collective judgement in determining the appropriateness of any proposed project.

### A. General Standards

Subject to review and approval of alterations to exterior architectural features under the terms of this report, the following standards shall apply:

1. The historic character of a property should be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property should be avoided.
2. Changes and additions to the landmark which have taken place over time are evidence of the history of the property and its context. These changes may have acquired significance in their own right and, if so, that significance should be recognized and respected.
3. Significant historic and architectural features of the landmark, including but not limited to those identified in this report, should be preserved if practicable in a manner consistent with these standards and criteria.
4. Deteriorated architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement, the new feature must match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials.
5. The use of synthetic replacement materials is discouraged, except when substituted for perishable features exposed to the weather or when necessary to accommodate the effects of climate change.<sup>1</sup>
6. Chemical or physical treatments (such as sandblasting) must not be used in a manner that damages historic materials. The surface cleaning of structures must be undertaken using the gentlest means possible and the results should preserve the patina that characterizes the age of the structure.
7. Architectural (building façade) lighting, streetscape lighting, and signage lighting, when allowed by a Certificate of Appropriateness, should reinforce definitive characteristics of historic and contemporary architecture as well as create high quality

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<sup>1</sup> See *Cambridge Historical Commission Practices in Reviewing Synthetic Trim and Gutters*, June 26, 2018

- 24-hour streetscapes. To achieve these goals, projects should minimize brightness, and light trespass, monitor light color (temperature Kelvin), and focus lighting on significant features
8. Significant archeological resources affected by a project should be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures must be undertaken.
  9. Additions should be designed in a manner that makes clear what is historic and what is new, but should not arbitrarily impose contrasting materials, scales, or design vocabularies. Design of the new work may be contemporary or may reference design motifs from the historic building. Regardless of the design approach, the result should appear as a harmonious whole.
  10. Additions should reflect an explicit understanding of the architectural character of the historic building and its context.
    - Additions should respect the essential form of the historic building and be clearly recessive or subsidiary to the original structure in massing, materials, colors, and textures.
    - Additions should be considered in terms of the appearance of other buildings in the historic district or neighborhood. Additions should clarify and extend the character of the place, always seeking continuity and wholeness in the built environment.
    - Additions should not compromise the historic aspects, architectural significance, or the distinct character of the landmark, neighborhood, and environment.
    - Additions should be clearly differentiated from the historic building but still compatible in terms of mass, materials, relationship of solids to voids, and color.
    - Additions should cause the least possible loss of historic materials so that character-defining features are not obscured, damaged, or destroyed.
    - Additions are best located at the rear or on an inconspicuous side of a historic building and limited in size and scale in relationship to the historic building.
    - Rooftop additions should be set well back from historic facades so that the historic structure retains its integrity of form and mass. Additional stories, when required for the new use, should be set back from the wall plane and be as inconspicuous as possible when viewed from the street. Designers should be cognizant of distant views and take advantage of existing parapets to conceal rooftop structures.
    - Additions such as balconies and greenhouses should be placed on non-character-defining elevations and limited in size and scale in relationship to the historic building.
    - Additions should be designed in such a way that if they were to be removed in the future the essential form and integrity of the landmark would be unimpaired.

## B. Suggested Review Guidelines for 727 Massachusetts Avenue

### 1. Architectural Character

The Cambridge Gas-Light Company building is a Renaissance Revival structure characterized by a two-story loggia surmounted by a seven-bay façade bearing shallow pilasters with Corinthian capitals and double-hung windows with alternating pediments. A shallow cornice and parapet give the appearance of a flat roof. The ashlar limestone masonry is ornamented with elaborate carvings, and the openings at ground level contain much original ironwork. The massing, character, and details of the structure should be respected.

### 2. Site Development.

The current building footprint extends to the lot lines on the east, south, and west, leaving a narrow strip of land unencumbered on the north side of the building. The north and west façades of the structure display an industrial character very different from the east and south facades. Subject to zoning constraints and the Certificate of Appropriateness process, new construction could be allowed even if it obscures or destroys the present north or west façades.

### 2. Alterations

All publicly-visible exterior alterations are subject to the Certificate of Appropriateness process.

#### a. Exterior surfaces

Exterior materials on the east and south facades should be preserved insofar as practicable. Special care should be taken to protect and maintain the limestone masonry. Repointing the mortar joints should be done with special care to maintain the strength, color and texture of the mortar and the profile of the joints. Cleaning should be carried out with minimum pressure and minimum concentrations, subject to on-site staff review and approval.

#### b. Fenestration

Most if not all historic window openings appear to retain their original windows and sash. Original sash should be evaluated for restoration and retrofitted with thermal glazing while maintaining operability if possible. Replacement windows, if allowed, should replicate historic patterns and details as closely as practicable while achieving energy efficiency goals.

#### c. Exterior features

The entrances at the east and west bays retain original wrought- and cast-iron bars that extend up to the pilaster capitals. The central bay features a cast-iron door surround with a classical entablature. All other bays except one retain their original three-part fenestration and original knee-walls. These should be retained and restored or replicated.

Storefront systems at the Bank of America entrance and at the office entrance consist of modern aluminum components with a black finish. Replacement elements may be contemporary in nature, but historic elements should be retained when possible.

Four reproduction wrought-iron sconces were installed in 2018. These should be retained.

The pilasters on both sides of the center entrance bay and both sides of the pilaster on the southeast corner of the building bear incised bronze lettering denoting the original owner of the building, the Cambridge Gas-Light Company. These should be preserved and not covered with other signage.

#### d. Roof

The roof of the Gas-Light building contains several skylights and assorted mechanical equipment that are almost entirely concealed by a parapet. The only visible rooftop structures are an elevator override and a copper-clad penthouse over the main staircase. About half of this one-story structure appears above the parapet.

In general, rooftop HVAC equipment, if required, should be grouped to minimize visual intrusion. Solar panels should be mounted close to the roof so as to be screened by the parapet.

#### e. Accessibility

Accessibility at street-level entrances on Massachusetts Avenue and Temple Street may be achieved by removing a portion of the granite slab that creates a step up into the building. This should not be done in a way that disturbs the knee walls of the entrances. Doors should be lengthened; jambs should remain in place.

#### f. Interior features

Although interior features are not subject to the jurisdiction of the Cambridge Historical Commission, the owner should be encouraged to preserve the vaulted two-story ground floor interior that recalls the original purpose of the building as a showcase for modern electric technology.

#### g. Architectural lighting

Architectural lighting should conform to the standard for review.

### 3. Additions

The nature of the Cambridge Gas-Light Company building site is such that additions can only take place at the back of the site or on the roof. Landmark designation should not necessarily preclude adding new floors to the building, but any rooftop addition should conform to the standards for additions enumerated above. Consideration of a proposed addition should consider the architectural character of the Gas-Light building and its immediate surroundings, including the similar massing of the Cambridgeport Savings Bank building at 689 Massachusetts Avenue, the low-rise storefronts immediately to the west, and the varying character and densities of structures on Massachusetts Avenue and Temple Street.

Revised November 24, 2021