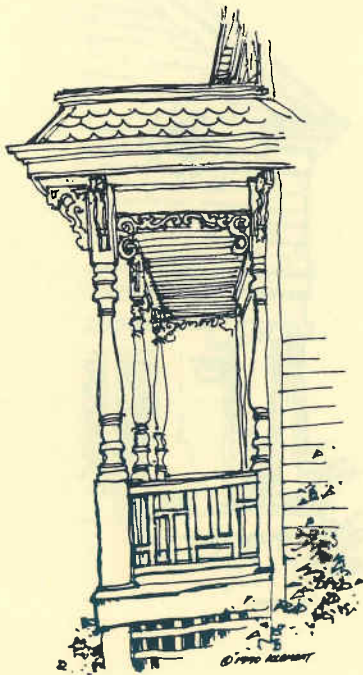


# Old West Side

Historic District Study Committee  
Final Report  
October 23, 1990

**PROPOSED REVISION TO THE  
OLD WEST SIDE HISTORIC DISTRICT ORDINANCE**  
October 23, 1990



Background

Ann Arbor's Old West Side is a compact neighborhood of primarily 19th Century homes located south and west of downtown. It is bounded on the east by South Main Street and the Ann Arbor Railroad, on the north by West Huron Street and West Park, on the west by Crest, Liberty and Seventh Streets and on the south by West Madison, Fifth Street, Wurster Park and Koch Street.

Between 1848 and 1861, William S. Maynard, pioneer, Mayor, successful merchant and real estate developer subdivided and added to the village the area bounded roughly by Liberty, Seventh, Madison and Mosley and Ashley - what we think of today as the heart of the district. The lots are still fairly uniform in size - 66 feet wide by 132 feet deep - and the grid pattern of the blocks forms a pleasant counterpoint to the gently rising slope of the land to the southwest.

The area between Huron and Liberty is less uniform, both architecturally and topographically. Here one of the tributaries of Allen's Creek forms a valley separating the two main corridors. Though Seventh Street was platted by Samuel Jewett in 1871, it was not until the last decade of the 1800's before Washington Street was extended westward from First Street to meet Seventh. Later subdivisions with much smaller lots were added along Murray and Mulholland Streets in the teens.

Architecture

While there are a few large, "high style" buildings throughout the neighborhood, the majority of the buildings are modest, gable-fronted, clapboard-sided houses one-and-one-half to two stories tall, with wide front porches and generous side yards. Nearly every Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century architectural style can be found: small Classic Revival houses from the 1830's and '40's, Italianate "cubes", many examples of Queen Anne from the most fanciful to the very simple, Colonial Revival, Craftsman and Bungalow. The latter are most prevalent west of Seventh Street along Crest and Buena Vista. Modern intrusions, in the form of three story brick apartment blocks, are found primarily east of Third and north of Jefferson closer to downtown.

Bach School, with its older red brick Gothic Revival sections dating back to the mid-1920's, serves as the neighborhood's social focus. Nearby is a complex of brick industrial buildings which include the Michigan Furniture factory built in the 1860's, the Michigan Union Brewery built in 1903 and the Argus III building built around 1940, all now rehabilitated for modern office use. A few small neighborhood grocery stores provide local convenience for residents, the most popular of which is the Washtenaw Milk and Ice Cream in the southeastern corner of the district.

The neighborhood has always had a strong ethnic German heritage with German-speaking churches, schools and newspapers for its residents. The architecture of the neighborhood reflects the modest social aspirations of its citizens as well as their firm reliance on quality craftsmanship. Homeowners tended to be shopkeepers or workers in the various nearby industries such as the furniture factory, the brewery or the vinegar works located along the industrial belt of the Ann Arbor Railroad.

### Development of the Historic District

In 1969, a commercial development was proposed that would have obliterated several blocks in the area where the railroad crosses South Main. For some time the neighborhood had been experiencing gradual decay as older residents died and more and more houses were converted or demolished for apartments. The threat of such a large development, however, was enough to galvanize a group of residents into forming a strong neighborhood association. Recognizing that the problem was much broader than the particular development threat, the Old West Side Association commissioned an "Environmental survey" with grant funds from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, local banks and the University of Michigan. The Landscape Architectural firm of Johnson, Johnson & Roy produced a handsome publication detailing the survey's recommendations:

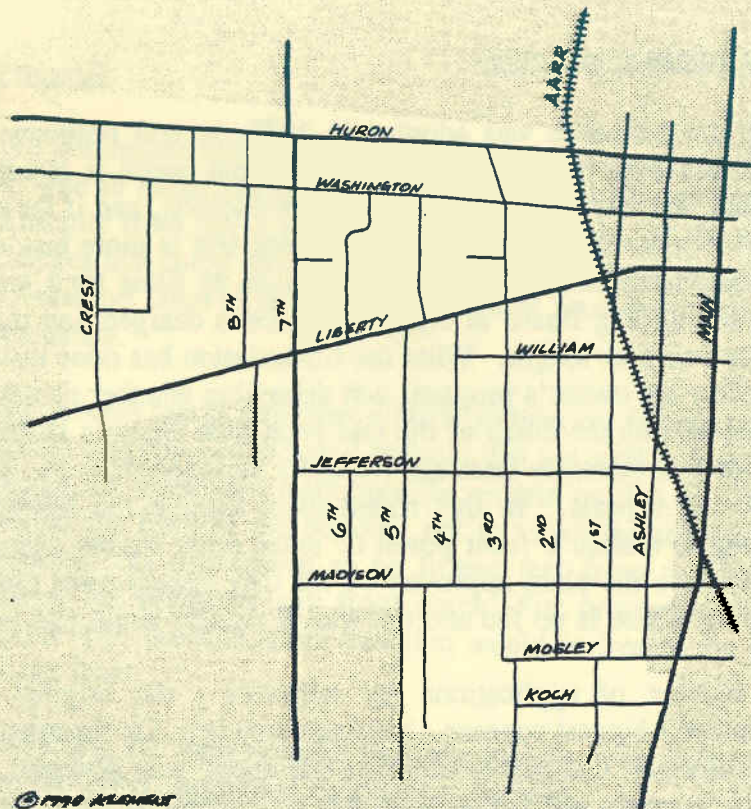
- that the neighborhood be listed on the National Register of Historic Places - that it also be designated as a local historic district in order to protect the remaining environmental character and encourage rehabilitation of all existing structures.



Local Designation

The district was listed on the National Register in 1972, the first neighborhood to be listed solely for its environmental character. The boundaries are larger than those shown below, including the southwest corner and extending south to Pauline Boulevard. While this provided considerable prestige and helped to build morale, it did not offer any protection.

In 1974 therefore, Council appointed a historic district study committee for the Old West Side. The committee was concerned that the usual requirement for Historic District Commission review of all building permits could inhibit the very kind of preservation activity by individual owners that the local designation was intended to encourage.



LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT BOUNDARIES

The ordinance proposed therefore set out specific regulations designed to maintain the environmental character of the historic setting:

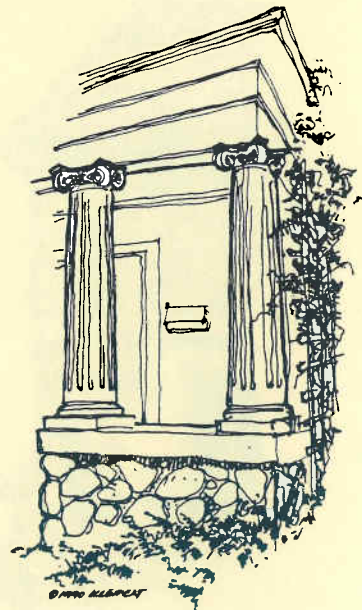
- additions at the front are restricted to maintain the rhythm of house and yard in the streetscape; garages must be set back and driveways kept narrow for the same reason,
- new siding over old clapboard must match the size of the old including all plain trim pieces and decorative details may not be covered or removed,
- front porches may not be changed or enclosed,
- new chain link fences are not allowed in the front yard,
- large trees are protected in front yards.

The Commission's only direct role under the original ordinance has been to approve or deny permits for demolition or moving. It was left to the Building Department staff, advised by the Commission, to determine whether or not a permit complies with the standards.

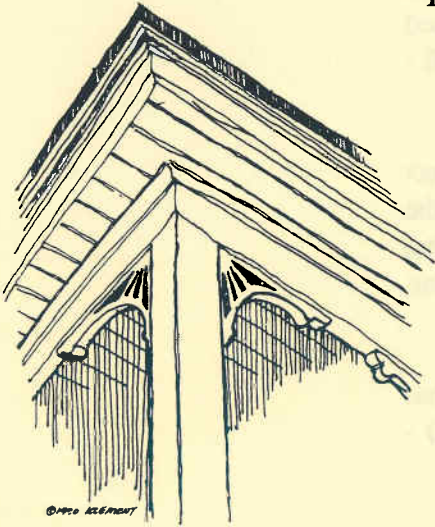
### The Ordinance in Action

Since the ordinance was adopted in 1978, several problems have developed with its administration. If a front porch is clearly not original, but a modern and inappropriate addition, and if the owner wants to remove it and replace it with one that is more historically accurate, technically this may only be done by filing for a variance from the Zoning Board of Appeals. A fee is charged and the wait is four weeks or longer. What the Commission has done instead is to review the owner's proposal and determine whether or not it "is consistent with the intent of the Old West Side Historic District ordinance and therefore does not require a variance from the Zoning Board of Appeals." In this round-about fashion the homeowner wanting to restore a front porch or make other simple changes is able to have the plans approved by the City agency most qualified to do so. There is no fee and the wait is usually about two weeks.

The number of applications for additions - the original study committee's biggest concern - has been very low. On the other hand porch changes, changes to windows and doors, new skylights, solar panels, dormers and fire escapes are all continuing concerns over which the ordinance has almost no control. The Commission now has a history of regulating these types of changes in most other districts at least on front and side elevations.



In order to address these problems, the Historic District Commission and the board of the Old West Side Association jointly requested that Council appoint a new study committee to look at ways to improved the ordinance without changing its original intent. On February 23, 1989, Council appointed the following people:



From the Old West Side Association:

Jim Babcock	Laura Tyler
Steve Goethel	Mark Wishka
Carol Kamm	Yvonne Wulff
Barbara Murphy	Glenn Ziegler
Barbara Smith	

From the Historic District Commission:

Patricia Austin	Mary Jo Gord
David Copi	Richard Pasley
George Dodd	Norman Tyler
David Evans	

Proposal

The committee followed the rationale that homeowners should still be able to make repairs and rehabilitate their houses with as little difficulty from the city bureaucracy as possible. At the same time, changes that could adversely affect the architectural character of the streetscape deserve more control than is provided by the present ordinance.

The process that is proposed is fairly simple: the Commission would review all proposed exterior changes that are visible from the street except for those that meet specific criteria or that are far enough behind the front of the building not to affect the streetscape. That distance was determined to be fifteen feet from the front of the house, not including any front porch. For properties that are on corner lots, the side street elevation would be treated the same way as the front.

Reflecting the most popular building activity areas in recent years, the proposed "permitted exceptions" include:

- new windows and doors of any kind behind the front fifteen feet, as well as ones that match those already on the house within the front fifteen feet, (A - Figure 1, page 7)

