



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Joseph A. Curtatone

Mayor

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

KRISTENNA CHASE, *PRESERVATION PLANNER*
SARAH WHITE, *PLANNER & PRESERVATION PLANNER*

Case #: HPC 2018.008
Date: February 20, 2018

Recommendation: Denial/*Conditional*
Certificate of Appropriateness

PRESERVATION STAFF REPORT

Site: 56 Vinal Avenue

Applicant Name: Jocelyn Siegel
Applicant Address: 56 Vinal Avenue
Owner Name: Jocelyn & Jodie Siegel
Owner Address: 56 Vinal Avenue, Somerville

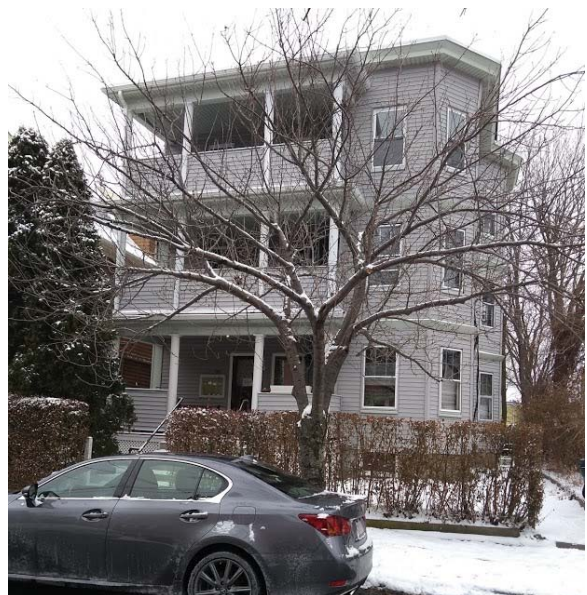
Petition: Jocelyn Siegel, Owner seeks permission from the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to rebuild porches with synthetic materials to meet building code.

HPC Hearing Date: June 20, 2017

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. **Subject Property:** The subject property located on Vinal Avenue on the Prospect Hill Neighborhood. See Form B for historic information. See photo of the building at the time of designation in 1989 for comparison with today's condition.

It is important to note that a previous owner was given a Certificate of Hardship in 1996 for alterations, this means that when there is an opportunity to bring a building closer to its period of significance, new owners must make an effort to do so. The building has been encased with vinyl, the brackets have been removed and the front porches have enclosed vinyl balustrades constructed at code height which alters the



proportions of the building. The Applicants were unaware of this requirement. There is no plan at this time to bring the building back.

2. **Proposal:** The Applicant would like to rebuild the existing porches with 42" Trex® railings and Fiberon® Burnt Umber decking, Permalat® porch skirt and other non-reparable and synthetic materials. The Applicant does not want to do any maintenance on the porches once the project is complete. The porch railings would be the full 42" height required by code. The Applicant has had experience with a tenant jumping or falling from the porch in an earlier year.

In an e-mail the Applicant has stated "Fiberon® decking sample I provided, but we remain committed to using a zero-maintenance composite material for the decks. We looked at many and this was truly the most wood-like in appearance, but if a different brand or style is preferred we are happy to consider it. If the Commission requires that we use wood, I suppose we can offer to use pressure-treated lumber that does not require maintenance (and we would not paint), but that does not seem like it would be a more attractive option."

II. FINDINGS FOR MATERIALS AND DESIGN

I. GENERAL APPROACH

The primary purpose of Somerville's Preservation Ordinance is to encourage preservation and high design standards in Somerville's Historic Districts, in order to safeguard the City's architectural heritage. The following guidelines have been developed to ensure that rehabilitation efforts, alterations, and new construction all respect the design fabric of the districts and do not adversely effect their present architectural integrity.

- C. Whenever possible, deteriorated material or architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced or removed.*
- D. When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence of the original or later important features.*
- E. Whenever possible, new materials should match the material being replaced with respect to their physical properties, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged.*

Porches, Decks, Balconies

The porch is an important stylistic element to the facade of a historic building because it frames the front entrance and sets the atmosphere for visitors. Porches also provide shade for adjacent rooms, help save energy costs, and often illustrate architectural style, which can help determine a construction date. In a densely built environment like Somerville, porches also act as a transitional area between private interior space and the surrounding neighborhood. Similar to porches, other transitional areas include balconies, decks, and covered entries.

A porch includes:

- Roof and its components (see roof section)
- Posts, columns, pilasters
- Railings and balusters
- Stairs
- Skirt
- Piers
- Built-In features (benches, planters)
- Openings, such as windows and doors
- Screening

Preservation Considerations for Porches

1. **The scale and massing of a porch should not be altered. All decorative details such as balusters, balustrades, columns, and brackets should be retained.**
2. Original masonry elements in porches should be retained and preserved. If mortar needs repair, the color and pointing should match the original mortar, if possible, and be compatible with that of the original masonry. Replacement masonry elements should be compatible with the style and materials of the historic building (for further details, see exterior siding and walls).
3. Even if an entrance is not used, it should remain in place if its porch is integral to the building design. Abandoned entries can be put back into use at a later date.
4. **If elements of the porch must be replaced, they should exactly match the originals in design and materials, based on photographic or physical evidence, or else they should make reference to the porch design of other houses in the neighborhood of the same style and period. Synthetic materials are highly discouraged.**
5. **Replacement posts and railings should match the proportions and stylistic elements of the existing porch, or else, at the discretion of the SHPC, they may be designed to minimize their visibility. If prominent, new posts and railings should not look either too beefy or too skinny in comparison to other porch elements such as corner posts and other details.**
6. **The spacing of replacement balusters should be in proportion to the style of the historic building.**
7. Cast or wrought-iron porch supports should not replace brick or wooden posts.
8. **Steps should be made of materials compatible with the style of the historic building.**
9. **Porch skirting may be made out of lattice or boards, either sawn or vertical. Synthetic materials, with or without fake wood grain, are not allowed. Lattice spacing should be tight enough to minimize the visibility of the interior space and structure under the porch.**
10. Additional porch elements should not be added if they did not exist historically. For instance, the addition of decorative "gingerbread" brackets to a Craftsman-style porch is inappropriate.
11. **Balustrades or railings should not be added unless there is historical evidence that a balustrade existed on the porch. Railings that must be added for modern code considerations should be compatible with the design, materials and scale of the original porch. If alteration to the height of the railing or balustrade is required by building code, new designs should retain the proportions of the original railing height.**
12. The addition of a porch which would not have existed on a house historically, such as an elaborate, highly detailed porch on a secondary entrance, is strongly discouraged

13. Open porches and porticos should not be permanently enclosed or filled with windows.

14. **Pressure-treated wood must be painted or wrapped and match the style and appearance of other historic wooden elements.**

15. **Any new porch work must not destroy, damage, or obscure historic details and must be reversible.**

Proposal: The existing porches were altered in 1996 under a Certificate of Hardship.

“Proposal for Porch Replacement at 56 Vinal Avenue

Rebuild porches in existing footprint. Remove vinyl siding walls between columns, replace with open 30” balustrade, with 2x4 horizontal railings above at 4” centers to code-compliant height. Replace columns with new round columns. Remove existing structure between 1st and 2nd, and 2nd and 3rd floors, install new decking with 3 1/2” beadboard ceilings. Maintain roof at 3rd floor level. Replace lattice at base with vertical/horizontal lattice. <http://www.permalatt.com/>

Materials:

Open balustrade railing: Trex “Transcend” line. High quality matte finish, looks like painted wood, not like plastic. Does not rot, flake or chip like painted wood. 2x4 horizontal railing: pressure treated lumber, painted the same color as the house, as per photo provided by Kristi Chase. <https://www.trex.com/products/railing/transcend/>

Fiberon “Symmetry” line decking. Top-of-the line. Is not wood but looks like wood (certainly from the street!), and is maintenance-free. <https://www.fiberondecking.com/products/decking/symmetry-decking>

Note to the Commission: I have great appreciation for the architectural beauty of our city, and have worked in the architectural field myself. My sister and I own this house together and have selected the materials for the decks and railings carefully, regarding quality and aesthetics, as we care very much about it. We are eager to beautify the house (that I lovingly refer to as “the ugly gray triple-decker”) by removing the unsightly porches and rebuilding with traditional open balusters.

*Reading the Guidelines, I see that “if elements of the porch must be replaced, they should exactly match the originals... or else they should make reference to the porch design of other houses in the neighborhood of the same style and period.” And that “synthetic materials are highly discouraged.” Kristi has been unable to identify an example of “other houses in the neighborhood of the same style and period” from which we can base our design. Further, I am including a photo of a beautifully restored home around the corner from me at 42 Walnut St that has a 42” high railing on their upper floor deck (photo attached). **The proposal we are putting forward reflects a compromise between restoration to the original design, style, shape and scale of the building; and the use of new and improved materials now on the market that represent a long-lasting attractive appearance, without sacrificing aesthetics.***

I have lived in this house for 20 years, and am responsible for all maintenance and upkeep in all three units as well as the exterior of the house. I am also a single parent and sole supporter of my two children. I have learned from experience that, because I have both a limited budget and limited time, maintenance chores often lapse. I now have an opportunity to rebuild my porches, beautify my building, and use modern, maintenance-free materials. It has been estimated that maintenance costs on my south-

facing decks would be \$1,500- \$2,000 every three years to sand and re-coat, if built with wood and painted. This is an expense I simply cannot afford."

Staff Findings: Staff could not find evidence that any historic commission had approved the use of synthetic decking where it was visible from the street. Staff did find several examples of synthetic materials used for gutters on the condition that it had the correct profile and size and was painted to match the trim.

Staff finds that the proposal does not meet the most basic guideline of repair or replacement with in-kind materials. In this case the materials that had been there until 1996. The proposed material is a synthetic, not wood. The sample was inspected outdoors to ensure that the lighting matched the conditions of use. From a distance, the proposed replacement material has the general appearance of a traditional material but still retains both a glossy and a flat appearance unlike wood. Also, Staff finds the edge of the planks is insufficiently differentiated in color and the texture is flat. Staff also finds that the material when viewed from a grazing angle has a reflective tone that definitely looks like a synthetic material.

Staff finds that the proposed alterations do not meet the above HPC Guidelines to repair or replace with in-kind materials nor does the height meet the historically appropriate ones as seen in the 1989 photo of the building. Staff has suggested that they investigate building railing to the appropriate height with a 'view panel'. The rail height would meet code requirements but would not detract appreciably from the sense of the early 20th century. The Applicant submitted a photo of 42 Walnut Street which has a 42" railing. This property is not a Local Historic District

No specific information has been given regarding the structural components of the porch, the ceilings, the gutters or the return of the brackets as to size and materials although they have been referenced above.

III. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the information provided and an assessment of the proposal against the Somerville LHD Guidelines, Staff does NOT recommend APPROVAL of the use of AZEK®, Fiberon® or Permalatt® for the front porch. However, Staff does recommend APPROVAL of a Certificate of Appropriateness to return the building incrementally to its original form.

1. All appropriate building permits shall be obtained prior to the start of any work.
2. The existing porch shall be demolished.
3. The porches shall be rebuilt to match the original as seen in the attached photo.
4. All supports shall be hidden behind the skirt and trim.
5. Porch skirts shall oriented diagonally and have a frame.
6. All visible materials shall be wood, preferably of a high quality hardwood with demonstrated durability.
7. Porch columns shall be round with a simple capital.
8. Porch fascia shall be dimensioned to receive the addition of brackets at a future date.
9. Gutters shall be either 4 ½" or 5 ¼" wood profile.
10. The decking on the upper floors may be of synthetic material, providing it is not visible from the public right of way.
11. Railings shall consist of simple hand and foot rails with 2" balusters, spaced to code.
12. The ceilings shall be bead board.
13. Vinyl siding along the porch shall be removed and replaced with wood clapboard painted to match the existing siding.
14. If changes are necessary to the proposed design for which this Certificate of Appropriateness was issued, new plans shall be submitted to Historic Staff prior to commencing the work.

15. Historic Staff shall issue a sign-off upon completion of the project that this was done in accordance with the Certificate.



1988 Photo by
Gretchen Schuler







proposal - 56 Vinal Ave