Preservation in a Growing City: 
A Consideration of Conservation Districts 
for Washington, DC Neighborhoods

Darcy Buckley
December 17, 2013
Introduction

Problem Statement

In a period of return to the city, this paper addresses our current preservation tool kit’s efficacy for protecting historic urban neighborhoods’ defining identity and sense of place.
Introduction

Research Questions

- Are Conservation Districts an appropriate tool for Washington neighborhoods?
- How have Conservation Districts been used in other cities?
- What would a Conservation District program look like in DC?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this tool?
Introduction

Methodology

- Case study of two DC neighborhoods, Bloomingdale and Eckington, which face the challenge of welcoming change and growth while maintaining neighborhood identity, community character and sense of place
Methodology

- Identified and analyzed the existing legal and political environment of the District of Columbia, as well as the material fabric of Bloomingdale and Eckington, through historic research, site visits, review of relevant plans and studies, Census data, consultation with the DC Historic Preservation Office (HPO), and discussions with residents.
Contributions

- Useful for Eckington and Bloomingdale, as well as other DC neighborhoods
- Applications for cities nationwide
- Adds to small but growing field of academic literature on Conservation Districts
Introduction

Outline

- Context
- Neighborhood Analysis
- Current Tools
- Conservation District Precedents
- Recommendations
- Conclusion
Mid City East Small Area Plan

- DC Office of Planning led a community-based planning process from April 2013 to December 2013
- Currently in draft form, expected to be adopted by Council in early 2014
- Framework for conservation, development, sustainability and connectivity
- Recommends exploring options for historic district or pilot conservation district designation for the neighborhoods of Eckington and Bloomingdale
Overview

Bloomingdale and Eckington

- Distinct neighborhoods divided by North Capitol Street
- Developed as row house neighborhoods at the turn of the 20th Century.
- Struggling to balance growth with the conservation of community character
Context

- Diverse historic resources including residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial properties
- Dating primarily from the 1870s to the 1930s
- Strong connections to city history
- Period of decline
- Major changes in past decade
Planning Context

  
  Consider the designation of Columbia Heights, Eckington, Bloomingdale, and other Mid-City neighborhoods as “Conservation Districts.”

- DC Historic Preservation Plan, 2013
  
  Be open to new possibilities and new approaches, including tools beyond historic district designation.

- Mid City East Small Area Plan, 2013
  
  Explore options for designating Bloomingdale and/or Eckington as an historic district or a pilot.
Analysis

Assets

- Strong neighborhood identity and sense of place
- Cohesive blocks of well-built row houses, lively roof line, varied streetscape
- Variety of housing types, including small historic apartment buildings
- Historic commercial corridor
- Compatible coexistence with historic industrial area
- 3 historic landmarks; 21 potential
- High degree of integrity
Analysis

Threats

- Pop ups
- Excessive/incompatible rear additions
- Other inappropriate additions
- Demolition and teardown
- Incompatible new development
- Escalating values and loss of affordability
- Loss of fabric that supports diversity
Analysis

Pop Ups

- Additions of one or more stories to existing buildings
- Constructed by speculative developers
- Negatively impacts the architectural character of the neighborhood
Analysis

Pop Ups

Historically and aesthetically insensitive additions

- Destroy character-defining elements such as turrets
- Disrupt the consistency of the roofline
- Damage the overall integrity of the block
Current Tools

Historic District Designation

- DC’s Historic District Protection Act of 1978
- 28 neighborhood-based historic districts
- Eligibility determined by National Register Criteria

- Review required for most exterior alterations, repairs and replacements; new construction; demolition; subdivision

- Benefits include: limited grant and tax incentive eligibility, insulation from extreme market fluctuations, the stabilization of residential patterns and increased connections among neighbors and higher rates of community participation owners
Opposition to Historic District Designation

- Philosophical and economic misgivings, in addition to popular property rights concerns.
- Increase the cost of maintenance and minor additions
- Unnecessarily restrict growth
- Escalate gentrification and displacement
- Multiple failed efforts to create Historic Districts in neighborhoods such as Lanier Heights, Brookland, Chevy Chase, and Barney Circle.
Current Tools

Other tools

- Historic Landmark Designation
- Multiple Property Designation
- Grant Programs
- Heritage Tourism
Conservation Districts

- Increasingly popular tool for preserving the character of established residential neighborhoods.
- Not supported by D.C.’s historic preservation ordinance, however steps are being taken to revise the ordinance.
- Referred to as a “Historic district-lite”
- Similar to, but more lenient than, historic district design guidelines.
- Design guidelines focus on regulating consistent massing, height, setback, and orientation that unify the neighborhood and contribute to the character.

Cambridge, MA
Nashville, TN
Philadelphia, PA
Indianapolis, IN
Conservation District Precedents

Cambridge, MA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protection for neighborhoods with</th>
<th>Merit but do not qualify for historic district status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Requirements</strong></td>
<td>Distinctive character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Review Required for</strong></td>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demolition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exterior alteration except color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administration</strong></td>
<td>Neighborhood Commissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Review Process</strong></td>
<td>HC staff issues Certificates of Non-Applicability, or forwards to the Neighborhood Commission for a public hearing before issuing a COA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conservation District Precedents

Cambridge, MA

| Protection for neighborhoods with Merit but do not qualify for historic district status |
| Requirements | Distinctive character |
| Review Required for Construction Demolition Exterior alteration except color |
| Administration | Neighborhood Commissions |
| Review Process | HC staff issues Certificates of Non-Applicability, or forwards to the Neighborhood Commission for a public hearing before issuing a COA |
Conservation District Precedents

Nashville, TN

| Protection for neighborhoods with Insufficient support for historic district levels of review |
| Requirements National Register criteria |
| Review Required for Demolition New construction Additions Relocations |
| Administration Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission |
| Review Process HC staff approves plans or forwards to MHZC for public hearing |
### Conservation District Precedents

#### Nashville, TN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protection for neighborhoods with insufficient support for historic district levels of review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Register criteria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Review Required for

- Demolition
- New construction
- Additions
- Relocations

#### Administration

- Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission

#### Review Process

- HC staff approves plans or forwards to MHZC for public hearing
## Conservation District Precedents

**Indianapolis, IN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protection for neighborhoods with</th>
<th>Merit but do not qualify for historic district status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requirements</td>
<td>Historic association and a strong sense of time and place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Required for</td>
<td>Construction, Demolition, Additions, Most roof and front facade alterations, Relocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Process</td>
<td>HPC staff issues administrative COA, sends to a hearing officer, or forwards to the IHPC for hearing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Conservation District Precedents

## Indianapolis, IN

| Protection for neighborhoods with Merit but do not qualify for historic district status |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Requirements                                | Historic association and a strong sense of time and place                                  |
| Review Required for                        | Construction                                                                             |
|                                            | Demolition                                                                              |
|                                            | Additions                                                                               |
|                                            | Most roof and front facade alterations                                                  |
|                                            | Relocation                                                                              |
| Administration                              | Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission                                             |
| Review Process                              | HPC staff issues administrative COA, sends to a hearing officer, or forwards to the IHPC for hearing |
# Conservation District Precedents

## Philadelphia, PA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protection for neighborhoods with</th>
<th>Insufficient support for historic district levels of review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requirements</td>
<td>Consistent physical character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Required for</td>
<td>Exterior alterations visible from public way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demolition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of vacant lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Planning department; administrative review only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Process</td>
<td>Planning department staff issues Certificates of Compliance, with conditions if warranted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Conservation District Precedents

## Philadelphia, PA

### Protection for neighborhoods with insufficient support for historic district levels of review

### Requirements
- Consistent physical character

### Review Required for
- Exterior alterations visible from public way
- Demolition
- New construction
- Use of vacant lot

### Administration
- Planning department; administrative review only

### Review Process
- Planning department staff issues Certificates of Compliance, with conditions if warranted
## Conservation District Precedents

### Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protection for neighborhoods with</th>
<th>Cambridge</th>
<th>Nashville</th>
<th>Indianapolis</th>
<th>Philadelphia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requirements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Required for</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AN ACT
IN THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
To provide protection for historic landmarks, historic districts, and conservation districts in the District of Columbia

BE IT ENACTED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA,
That this act may be cited as the Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978, as amended, or the Historic Preservation Act of 2014.

Section 2. Purposes. (D.C. Official Code § 6-1101)

(a) It is hereby declared as a matter of public policy that the protection, enhancement and perpetuation of properties of historical, cultural and aesthetic merit are in the interests of the health, prosperity and welfare of the people of the District of Columbia. Therefore, this act is intended to:

1. Effect and accomplish the protection, enhancement and perpetuation of improvements and landscape features of landmarks and districts which represent distinctive elements of the city’s cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history;
2. Safeguard the city’s historic, aesthetic and cultural heritage, as embodied and reflected in such landmarks and districts;
3. Foster civic pride in the accomplishments of the past;
4. Protect and enhance the city’s attraction to visitors and the support and stimulus to the economy thereby provided; and
5. Promote the use of landmarks, historic districts, and conservation districts for the education, pleasure and welfare of the people of the District of Columbia.

(b) It is further declared that the purposes of this act are:

1. With respect to properties in historic districts:
   (A) To retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the historic district and to encourage their adaptation for current use;
   (B) To assure that alterations of existing structures are compatible with the character of the historic district; and
   (C) To assure that new construction and subdivision of lots in an historic district are compatible with the character of the historic district;
2. With respect to historic landmarks:
   (A) To retain and enhance historic landmarks in the District of Columbia and to encourage their adaptation for current use; and
   (B) To encourage the restoration of historic landmarks.
3. With respect to archaeological sites designated as historic landmarks or contributing properties within historic districts:
   (A) To protect historic and prehistoric archaeological sites from irreparable loss or destruction; and
   (B) To encourage the retrieval of archaeological information and artifacts when the destruction of an archaeological site is necessary in the public interest.
   (Note: Paragraph 3 was added by D.C. Law 16-185 on November 16, 2006)
4. With respect to properties in conservation districts:
   (A) To retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the conservation district and to encourage their adaptation for current use;
   (B) To assure that major additions to existing structures are compatible with the character of the conservation district; and
   (C) To assure that new construction in a conservation district is compatible with the character of the conservation district.

Section 3. Definitions. (D.C. Official Code § 6-1102)
## Recommendations

### Conservation District Draft Ordinance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protection for neighborhoods with excessive support for historic district levels of review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Required for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations

Conservation District
Draft Ordinance

The proposed amendment defines “major additions” as:

... [the] expansion of an existing building or structure that:

(A) increases the height of the building or structure;
(B) adds to the front of the building or structure;
(C) increases the gross floor area of the building or structure by 500 square feet or more; or
(D) increases the footprint of the building or structure by 250 square feet or more.
Recommendations

Assessment of Draft Ordinance

- Builds on a system already in place
- Use of familiar standards
- Clearly differentiation with a lower level of regulation and review
- Allow for compatible growth
- Addresses public demand
Recommendations

Challenges

- Public presentation and public education campaign
- System to allow a conservation district to become historic district
- Draft major addition design guidelines
Recommendations

Additional Recommendations

- Revise demolition ordinance, strengthen penalties
- Prepare MPD form for Eckington Industrial area