



HISTORIC REVIEW COMMISSION OF PITTSBURGH

DESIGN GUIDELINES: **NEW GARAGES**

A. Introduction

1. During the first decade of the twentieth century, ownership of automobiles in the United States became widespread. This led to the conversion of many older stables and carriage houses into garages, and the first construction of buildings specifically designed to shelter cars. By the 1920s, freestanding garages had become commonplace. Some of these garages were designed to match the architectural style of the main house; others were simple utilitarian structures. They were built with a wide range of materials: brick, wood siding or shingles, stucco, patterned concrete blocks, and even thin embossed metal sheets, with standard roofing materials of the day (slate, clay tiles, metal, and asphalt shingles). Windows were usually installed in the side walls of the garages. The earliest garage doors were side-hinged barn-type doors, or bi-fold doors, or sliding doors. Sectionalized roll-up doors and single-piece swing-up doors became popular after 1920.

2. During the 1920s, architects of substantial free-standing houses began to incorporate garages into the design of the house. At first, they were built close to the house, and connected to it by pergolas, walkways, and walls. Later, in certain styles, garages were built as part of the house itself, occupying a formal (Colonial Revival style) or informal (Tudor) position in the architectural composition. In some densely-built urban areas, garages were even built into the raised basements of houses. In all cases, the visual impact of the garage was minimized.

B. Zoning variances

1. Because of the sizes of the lots in Pittsburgh's historic districts, it may be necessary to obtain a zoning variance from the Zoning Board of Adjustment before a new garage may be constructed. This variance, if needed, should be obtained prior to filing an application for the review and approval of the HRC. To determine if you must seek such a variance, call the Zoning Office at 412-255-2181. If it is needed, call the Zoning Board of Adjustment application counter at 412-255-2659 for information.

C. Design guidelines

1. The staff of the HRC can administratively approve designs for new garages that meet the following guidelines. Designs that do not meet the guidelines must be reviewed and approved by the HRC itself before they may be constructed.

2. Location: Garages should be located at the rear of a building lot. If an alley exists behind the lot, the garage should open into that alley. If there is no alley, then a driveway to the garage could be constructed between the house and one of its neighbors.

3. Form: Freestanding garages should be simple rectangular boxes. If a garage has a flat roof, then the exterior walls should rise above the roofline to form a parapet. If the roof is pitched (with the ridge of the roof running either from front to back, or from side to side) or hipped, then the roof should end in projecting eaves. The eaves can be open, with exposed rafter ends, or closed, with a soffit and fascia; both should be equipped with gutters and downspouts.

4. Size: Early garages were 10 to 12 feet wide by 18 to 24 feet deep, with an eight-by-eight-foot doorway. Wider garages were built in multiples of the 10-to-12-foot bay widths, with separate garage doors for each bay.

5. Materials: When a garage is visible from the main (front) street behind a free-standing house, the materials of the garage should mimic the materials of the house behind which it is constructed. However, a more utilitarian design is acceptable as well. In rowhouse neighborhoods, the utilitarian design is the most appropriate.

a. Acceptable Materials: Body of the garage: The walls facing a street or alley should be faced with brick, stucco, horizontal wood siding, smooth (not wood-grained) horizontal aluminum or vinyl siding (with four- or five-inch exposures), vertical tongue-and-groove wood board siding (not grooved plywood or T-1-11), or vertical board-and-batten siding. On the sides that are less visible, the garage walls may be built with concrete block, as long as the block is painted.

b. For the **gables**: The walls in the gables should be faced with horizontal siding, if they are not masonry.

c. For the **soffit and fascia** of the eaves: The soffit and fascia should be constructed with wood boards. The gutters should be half-round in profile, although K-style gutters are often acceptable. The downspouts should be round.

d. For the **roof**: If the roof is flat, then it is not visible from the street or alley and is therefore not under the jurisdiction of the Historic Review Commission. If it is sloped, then the roof should be covered with black or dark gray asphalt shingles or better: clay tiles, slates, or standing-seam metal.

e. For the **windows**: Simple one-over-one-light double-hung windows are appropriate for use in the side walls of garages.

f. For the **doors**: On a main street, paneled wood vehicular doors are strongly preferred, although paneled metal doors are acceptable. On an alley, paneled metal or wood doors are preferred (and required if the building is historic), although flush doors are acceptable. All garage doors should be painted. Pedestrian doors should be paneled only. Doors with glass panels or sections are preferable to doors without glass.

6. Painting: Unpainted brick should not be painted, but most other materials should be painted. Raw unpainted concrete block and wood should never be left unpainted. Paint colors should be subdued, and blend in with the colors in the general vicinity. When the garage is visible behind the main house, its color scheme should match that of the house.

7. Carports: Open-sided shelters for automobiles are acceptable as long as they are hidden behind a fence or gate, so that the visible segments appear like a full garage, or a pergola or other traditional yard structure. The corners should be sturdy-looking built-up supports (box columns or wall segments), and not single wood posts. The roof should conform to the garage roof guidelines, with siding in the gables, and siding extending down the sides of the carport as far as they are visible.