

My name is Alan Mayer. I live at 479 Walnut Street right next to the high school, and I have an architecture firm in Waban.

The majority of our work is residential renovations in Newton and as such I have come before the commission multiple times. I recently had the honor of serving on the commission for a short period of time. I have the unique experience of seeing it work from both sides of the table and I value the work that the commission does. I also recognize that the ordinance, as it is currently written and interpreted can, at times, be problematic.

From my own experience the core issue is not a question of revising the 50 year rule, but rather a question of defining when, and how much, context matters.

Under the current interpretation of the ordinance a series of buildings that are similar to each other are often given the status of preferably preserved. This, even though none of them would be considered architecturally or historically important by themselves. There are no criteria listed for determining how many buildings need to be similar. Nor is the architectural or historical importance of the group of buildings ever really discussed in depth in order to make that determination. The simple fact of like buildings being beside each other is often, though certainly not always, grounds for preferably preserving a structure.

From a policy perspective I think that we would all agree that there is a difference between a home designed by a famous architect, and the houses down the street that were built by a developer in a similar style. If John Kennedy had been born in Newton instead of Brookline I am sure that we would be preserving his home in a very different way than the same house next door. If Frank Lloyd Wright had built a Usonian house it would be treated differently than a ranch next door.

Context buildings or background building or street fabric is important to the overall experience of Newton as a whole – but the criteria for judging them needs to be different than the criteria for judging specific buildings for historical or architectural importance.

I believe that if we are able to address and clarify the city's policy towards context then we will also address many of the current concerns before the working group and the City Council today.

If for a moment, we imagine that context by itself is not a criteria for preferably preserving a building then the number of homes built in the 50's and 60's that would come before the commission would drop significantly. Doing this would still allow for research to see if they did qualify as significant in their own right.

Establishing a set of clear criteria for determining what constitutes context and when it is applicable would not only allow the council to debate an important policy issue, but it would also make the entire process so much more transparent and clear.

Personally, I do not believe that the existing ordinance as it is written, actually intended or allows preservation of buildings solely on the basis of context. But the interpretation of the ordinance has changed over time to expand the jurisdiction of the commission – often to the detriment of property owners.

Without clear and concise criteria for context the NHC will continue to make decisions that seem random or capricious to those who come before it.

Addressing this issue head on also addresses the issues before the council without creating a random date set in stone, and then an additional set of criteria for anything after that date. In this way we can have a policy driven discussion of what neighborhoods deserve preservation, rather than backing into an administrative solution that may only create more confusion and that will limit the important work of the commission.