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MEMORANDUM

TO: Fort Myers Beach Local Planning Agency
FROM: Bill Spikowski
DATE: June 10, 2003
SUBJECT: RESIDENTIAL DESIGN STANDARDS – For LPA meeting at noon on June 17, 2003

STATUS OF RESIDENTIAL DESIGN STANDARDS

When adopting the zoning chapter (chapter 34) into the Land Development Code in March, the Town Council did not include the proposed residential design standards that were in the LPA draft. These standards were the subject of considerable discussion at both public hearings; in the absence of sufficient consensus to proceed, the Town Council decided to delete the standards for now and revisit the subject in more depth.

The proposed residential design standards were fairly modest. No architectural review board was necessary because the standards did not require subjective decisions as to architectural style or neighborhood compatibility. The standards were simple enough to be handled administratively as part of the permitting process. The proposed standards addressed only the following subjects:¹

- **GARAGE DOORS:** Garage doors that face the street would be no more than 10 feet wide; would be recessed at least 10 feet behind the front of the building; and would be less than 50% of the building's width unless recessed 30 feet.
- **DRIVEWAYS:** Driveways in front of homes that are wider than 10 feet would be constructed with a pervious surface.
- **PORCHES AND BALCONIES:** Every new building would have a porch, balcony, or stoop facing the street, which may extend into the front setback zone (but no closer than 10 feet to the right-of-way) if it had no walls or screened areas.
- **SETBACKS:** Front setbacks would be reduced from the existing rule of 25 feet to 20 feet in the RS and RM zones and to 10 feet in the RC zone. Side setbacks would have been larger for waterfront lots (to preserve glimpses of the water) and smaller for inland lots.
- **BULK:** New duplexes and single-family residences would have their bulk limited through a maximum "floor-to-area" ratio (F.A.R.) of 0.80.

¹ Most of these standards were found in §§ 34-1011–1015 of the code (copy attached).

Instead of the proposed residential design standards, chapter 34 as adopted eliminated restrictions on garage doors facing the street and on driveways; eliminated the requirement for a porch or balcony; restored the pre-existing 25-foot front setbacks; kept side setbacks the same for waterfront and inland lots; and eliminated F.A.R. controls for buildings in the RS and RC zoning districts.

At this time the LPA or Town Council may wish to begin reexamining the previously drafted standards, or may choose to consider an entirely different approach. The following background information on residential design standards is provided to aid in this decision.

BASIS FOR RESIDENTIAL DESIGN STANDARDS

The purposes of the proposed residential design standards were identified as follows:

- Enhancing the character of residential streets and neighborhoods, which are some of the most important public spaces in the Town of Fort Myers Beach.
- Encouraging traditional building forms that reinforce the pedestrian orientation and neighborly quality of the town.
- Keeping neighborhood streets from being overwhelmed by parked cars and dominant garage doors.
- Requiring the fronts of buildings to contain architectural features that transition from private space indoors to public spaces outdoors.
- Maintaining and enhancing the town's sense of place and its property values.
- Implementing the design concepts in the Fort Myers Beach Comprehensive Plan.

The basic design concepts were identified during the planning process that resulted in the adoption of the Fort Myers Beach Comprehensive Plan in late 1998. That planning process began by formulating desirable visual images of the future. Those images became the basis for preparing much of the plan's text (and its later implementing regulations).

One drawing from that process was so evocative of the desired character for residential neighborhoods that it was placed on the front cover of the plan.

This drawing showed how private homes and their front yards, combined with the streets themselves, create some of the most important public spaces in the town — its quiet residential neighborhoods.



While preparing the new LDC, three key design factors were identified that could make an enormous difference in the character of these neighborhoods as they evolve:

- **Put a porch, balcony, or stoop on the front of each new house** – A traditional feature of homes has always been to have a porch, balcony, or stoop on the street side of the house. Many new homes don't contain these features. Especially in a community where many houses are oriented toward canals, bays, or the Gulf of Mexico, the original "front" of the house (facing the street) is often neglected.
- **Oversized houses can dwarf neighborhoods** – New homes should be expected to be larger than many existing homes, but there is a point beyond which houses can become completely out of scale with existing neighborhoods. This point can be hard to determine but is best evaluated by examining recently built homes in familiar neighborhoods.
- **Don't let garage doors dominate the fronts of houses** – Probably the most unfriendly feature of many new house designs is the dominance of garage doors on the front (street) side. These designs make the street feel like an alley. The typical family now owns more cars than ever, and this trend will probably continue. Because new homes must be elevated due to floodplain regulations, the most common solution at Fort Myers Beach is to put parking on the ground level below the living area. If access to this parking is from the side, or if a side driveway leads to a rear garage (attached or detached), all parking is hidden from the street and it has virtually no impact on the surrounding neighborhood. More commonly, however, access to the parking is directly from the front, an arrangement that can be perfectly suitable or that can result in garage-dominated building fronts, based on a few basic design decisions that are usually given little thought.

One goal of residential design standards is to extend the local building traditions from Fort Myers Beach. A related goal during the inevitable rebuilding of older homes is trying to keep neighborhoods as places that people want to walk in. The proposed standards (favoring prominent porches and balconies, with garage doors slightly recessed) were deemed essential because garage-dominated facades discourage pedestrians in the same way in which blank walls and parking lots discourage pedestrians in commercial areas — by creating visual boredom that discourages walking and thus interferes with normal neighborly interactions.

Attached to this memo are several documents that are relevant to this discussion:

- One is a page of photographs of house fronts that show how some subtle design changes on the front wall of houses can change the character of the public space of neighborhoods.
- Next is a page of renderings of designs for new elevated cottages on narrow lots that manage through various techniques to keep garage doors from overwhelming their facades. (A few of these designs would not actually appear exactly as drawn because picket fences are shown where driveways are needed.)
- Also included are several articles on residential design in other communities.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL TRENDS

National building trends over the past 15 years have had less effect on Fort Myers Beach than many other places because relatively few vacant lots remained and most homes were built by local builders rather than major developers. However, some trends occur everywhere, such as the increasing luxuriousness of homes that follows from a prosperous economy, and an increasing emphasis on interior conveniences and less on the local context for the house (the character of its specific block or neighborhood).

The residential neighborhoods of Fort Myers Beach have several distinguishing characteristics:

- Lots are relatively narrow and have already been sold off to individual owners, forcing redevelopment to occur on a lot-by-lot and home-by-home basis.
- There are no alleys, making all driveways enter from the front and placing other service functions such as trash collection in the front of homes.
- The entire town is a floodplain, which requires all living area to be elevated nearly a full story above ground.
- Property values are rising dramatically. Whenever this happens, older homes without modern amenities begin to be replaced by new and typically much larger homes.

The replacement of older homes at Fort Myers Beach will soon become a major trend. In the absence of special design regulations of some kind, it is likely that these new homes will follow national trends rather than evolving from local traditions. The local tradition of smaller homes on stilts will be replaced by larger homes whose double and triple garage doors will dominate neighborhood streets. This change will erode community character and reduce the strong sense of place that is so highly valued at Fort Myers Beach.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES FOR RESIDENTIAL DESIGN STANDARDS

Many other approaches to shaping the design of homes are also possible:

- A few communities select one or more architectural styles that new homes must be based upon (for instance, Mediterranean, or cracker-style Old Florida). A local variation could be to continue the beach cottage tradition with exposed pilings, many windows, elevated decks, and cement shingles. This approach often uses an architectural review board because style decisions are necessarily somewhat subjective.
- Other communities establish an architectural review board and give it broad discretion to judge designs that are proposed by individual lot owners. No specific styles are required, but decisions are based how well the design matches or extends local traditions, or how well it integrates into the surrounding neighborhood. This approach requires a separate board to make these subjective decisions in a public forum.
- Some communities give broad discretion to an architectural review board, but instead of asking that designs be well integrated, they ask for originality and have the authority to reject designs that have already been used in the same neighborhood.
- Some communities avoid the delays and uncertainty that are inherent in architectural review boards but create specific measurable standards that can be administered by staff. The proposed residential design standards followed this model, but the standards themselves could be quite different.

NEXT STEP

The LPA has not been directed to revisit residential design standards but it may choose to do so. The purpose of the June 17 meeting is to update LPA members on the outcome of the previously proposed standards and discuss whether the LPA wishes to take a lead role in revisiting this subject.

If so, the first question is whether to carefully reexamine each of the standards previously proposed, or whether an entirely different approach should be explored before focusing on any details.

Attachments: §§ 34-1011–1015 (standards proposed BUT NOT ADOPTED in March 2003)
Photographs Illustrating Garage Door Design Alternatives
Garage Treatment in Commercially Available Cottage Designs (Sater Design)
Minor Setback (Builder, June 1999)
Snouts Are Out (Governing, November 2002)
In Praise of Bungalows (Stephanos Polyzoides, May 2000)

DIVISION 8.
RESIDENTIAL DESIGN STANDARDS

Sec. 34-1011. Purpose and intent.

The purposes of design regulations for residential buildings include:

- (1) Enhancing the character of residential streets and neighborhoods, which are some of the most important public spaces in the Town of Fort Myers Beach.
- (2) Encouraging traditional building forms that reinforce the pedestrian orientation and neighborly quality of the town.
- (3) Keeping neighborhood streets from being overwhelmed by parked cars and dominant garage doors.
- (4) Requiring the fronts of buildings to contain architectural features that transition from private space indoors to public spaces outdoors.
- (5) Maintaining and enhancing the town's sense of place and its property values.
- (6) Implementing the design concepts in the Fort Myers Beach Comprehensive Plan.

Sec. 34-1012. Applicability and compliance.

(a) **Applicability.** These residential design standards apply to all residential buildings or portions thereof that are being newly built, and to “substantial improvements” to such buildings as defined in § 6-405.

(b) **Compliance determinations.** Compliance with these standards shall be determined as follows:

- (1) An applicant may seek approval of specific building plans during the RPD rezoning process (see § 34-941).
- (2) Unless final approval has been granted pursuant to subsection (1), the director shall make a determination of substantial compliance with these standards before a development order can be issued pursuant to ch. 10 of this code, or before a building permit can be issued if a development order is not applicable. Compliance determinations of the director are administrative decisions which may be appealed in accordance with article II of this chapter.

(c) **Variances and deviations.** Requests to vary from a substantive provision of these standards may

be filed using the variance procedures in § 34-87, or may be requested during planned development rezonings as a deviation as described in § 34-932(b).

Sec. 34-1013. Residential garages and driveways.

(a) New residential garage doors must be placed so as not to dominate the fronts of buildings. See examples in Figure 34-26.

- (1) Garage doors shall be no closer to streets or other public spaces than 10 feet behind the principal plane of the building frontage.
- (2) Individual garage doors facing streets or other public spaces shall not exceed 10 feet in width.
- (3) The total width of all garage doors facing the street cannot exceed 50 percent of the total width of the building. This limitation does not apply to garage doors that are more than 30 feet behind the principal plane of the building frontage.

(b) Driveways shall be a maximum of 10 feet wide in front of the principal plane of the building. If direct access for two or more vehicles is desired, all driveways shall be constructed either with:

- (1) porous (pervious) asphalt or concrete, or
- (2) one of the alternative surfaces described in 34-2017(b)(1), or
- (3) shall consist of two parallel strips of pavement for each vehicle path, with each strip up to two feet wide with planting areas between paved strips.

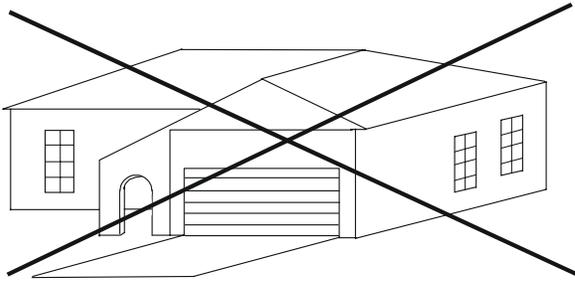
Sec. 34-1014. Residential porches, balconies, or stoops.

All residential buildings shall have at least one porch, balcony, or stoop facing the street. These porches, balconies, and stoops may extend into the street setback zone as provided in § 34-637(d)(2)b.

Sec. 34-1015. Maximum bulk of residential buildings.

The maximum bulk of residential buildings is regulated by the maximum floor area ratio established for each zoning district (see § 34-633 and Table 34-3).

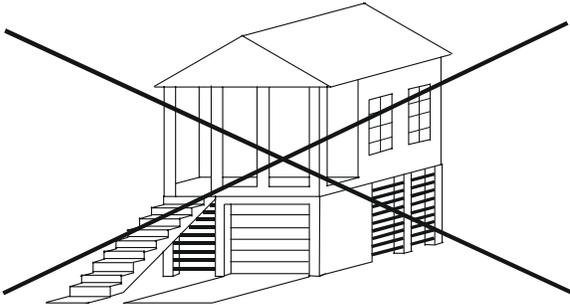
Sec. 34-1016–34-1168. Reserved.



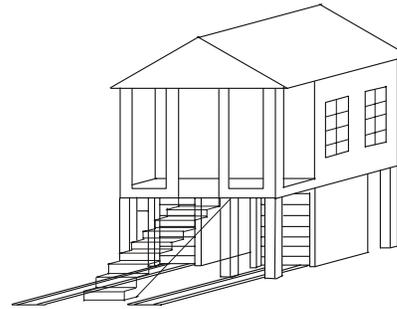
Dominant triple garage door (ground-level house) -- **DON'T DO THIS**



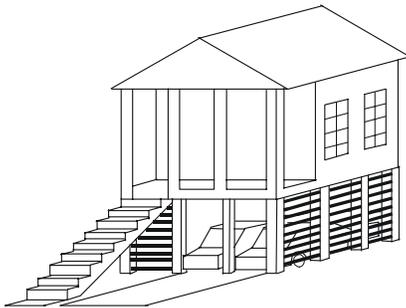
Porte cochere (ground-level house) -- **DO THIS**



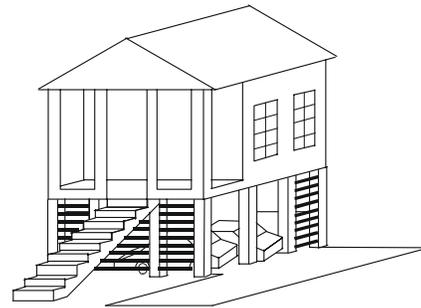
Dominant double garage door (elevated house) -- **DON'T DO THIS**



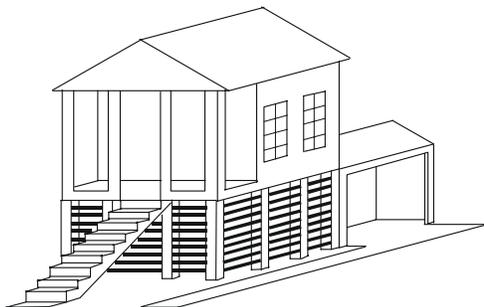
Recessed garage door (elevated house) -- **DO THIS**



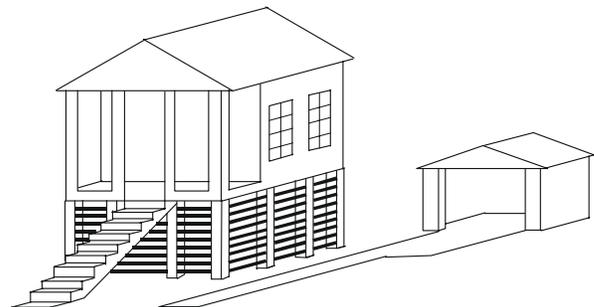
No garage door, front entry (elevated house) -- **DO THIS**



No garage door, side entry (elevated house) -- **DO THIS**



Garage attached, side entry (elevated house) -- **DO THIS**



Garage detached (elevated house) -- **DO THIS**

Figure 34-26

Photographs Illustrating Garage Door Design Alternatives

Figure 1 shows a typical stilt house with garage doors facing the street. Even with an attractive entry stairway, a porch, and a balcony, this house presents a stark face to the street.



Figure 1

Figure 2 shows a house with no garage doors at all. This arrangement is attractive (unless the garage area is not kept clean, when it can become quite unattractive!). This is the traditional building frontage in this area.



Figure 2

Figure 3 shows a standard garage door facing the street, but it is recessed slightly from the front of the house. The visual effect is to make the garage door much less dominant than the house in Figure 1.



Figure 3

Figure 4 shows a combination of a recessed single garage door and a second single garage door on a wall that is itself recessed from the front of the house. Again, garage doors are much less visually dominant when they are recessed slightly from the front wall of the house.



Figure 4

Garage Treatment in Commercially Available Cottage Designs



Minor Setback

A 70-acre park is the centerpiece of Rivermoore Park in suburban Atlanta, and architect and land planner Stephen Fuller wanted all of the front elevations to feel like extensions of that space. “There’s no way to create a beautiful street if we let the garage overpower it,” Fuller says. So he mandated that garages be pushed back from the elevation and houses moved closer to the street.

With a typical lot width of only 80 feet, and with buyers demanding big houses and three-car garages, Fuller had to get creative. He offered two configurations in the community. One is the push-back garage, which has two front-facing doors with one double deep bay;

the other is a tandem setup with a swing-in entry.

The houses are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, but an average garage push-back is 15 to 20 feet. “Even when a car is parked in the driveway, it’s away from the elevation,” says Fuller. “These lots are 20 feet narrower than in comparable neighborhoods, but here, you don’t get the sense of a huge, three-car garage.”

In a competitive market like Atlanta, Rivermoore Park developer Eagle Real Estate Advisors wanted a unique community design. But builders were reluctant to change what wasn’t broken. According to Fuller, they were hesitant for four reasons: “A. It was different; B. It was different; C. It



Courtesy Rivermoore Park

A three-car garage is de-emphasized on the Parkview model, by Atlanta-based Osley Builders, creating a more pedestrian-friendly streetscape.

wasn’t the same; and D. They thought it would cost more.”

The configuration is more expensive, but it simplifies driveway construction and softens the front façade. “The benefit is a greatly

improved perception of the entry of the house,” Fuller says, “and it has [paid off] in terms of the streetscape.” Buyers agree — Rivermoore Park is on track to sell more than 100 houses this year. —C.W.

Snouts Are Out

American houses used to be known for their front porches. Now, just as often, it's their garages that stand out. Homes with large garages jutting out in front have become so common that architects have coined a name for them: "snout houses."

Some cities are punching snout houses in the nose. Last month, the Sacramento city council adopted new design standards for single-family homes. Proportion is in; protruding garages are out: They must now sit flush with the face of the house. Moreover, the regulations say a garage can't take up more than 50 percent of the front of the house. Sacramento will grant home-builders some exceptions, but Portland, Oregon,



banned snout houses entirely in 1999.

Are Sacramento and Portland just being fussy? The cities' planners don't think so. They believe the new rules will make neighborhoods safer and build a stronger sense of community. "Prominent garages send a message: The car is first and

the residents are second," says Jim McDonald, a senior planner in Sacramento. "People drive up, hit their garage-door openers and go inside without ever seeing their neighbors. We want people to be able to see their own front yards and their neighbors' front yards. It puts more eyes on the street."

Sacramento's standards don't stop at the garage. They encourage other basic design features, too: front doors oriented toward the street and some decorative trim on the side of the house that faces the street. In fact, the new guidelines even promote front porches.

—Christopher Swope

Annals Of Modesty

Robert Reich, candidate for governor of Massachusetts, asked by the moderator of a debate to pose a question to one of the other candidates:

"What do you think is the most admirable thing about me?"

Gutting Their Goat

Slaughtering a goat and nailing its head to a tree is no longer allowed in Sanford, North Carolina. It seems that neighbors complained about the gruesome sight and the sound of goats and chickens being butchered in the backyards of newly arrived Mexican immigrants, whose celebratory barbecue tradition begins with promenading the main dish to its demise. Now if the subur-

ban revelers choose to slay an animal at their house, they face a \$50 fine.

Sanford, about 30 miles from Raleigh, isn't the first North Carolina municipality to grapple with this cultural tradition. Monroe, in the southwest corner of the state, also passed a no-slaughter ordinance calling for a \$100 fine for the first offense of backyard slaughter, increasing to \$500 for the third violation. Ironically, Monroe's main industry is the killing of chickens at a local processing plant.

Monroe city manager Douglas Spell says that the backyard butchering wasn't widespread, but it did hap-

pen several times and the city council wanted to take steps to stop it. Council members agreed that neighbors shouldn't be subjected to the view and the hair-raising noise of the event. But Spell is sympathetic to the fact that firing up the grill, roasting meat and bringing people together to eat it is a long-practiced tradition in most cultures—though minus the fresh kill. "It's like we would have a pig picking, or something of that nature," he says. "It's an outdoor barbecue. But it doesn't involve the slaughtering, just a group of people eating."

—Ellen Perlman



In Praise of Bungalows

Stefanos Polyzoïdes, 25 May 2000

Sprawl builders and developers call them 'product'. They are the typical houses of suburbia. Such 'product' is ostensibly the result of marketing research - what the people want. In fact, sprawl houses are planned and built by a cartel that is dedicated to design in a single urban mode and house pattern. As a result, the middle class in this country is increasingly being denied a choice of habitat.

Arranged in tracts, with garages in the front, tract houses destroy the streetscapes that they define. Without a place for neighbors to assemble and interact, community bonds are frustrated. Excessively interiorized and poorly landscaped, they are disconnected from the larger landscape and are environmentally unfit. Poorly proportioned and detailed and hurriedly built, they are designed to and induce a rapid first sale. Minimum price and maximum size, floor area and volume, is how they are marketed.

Evidence is mounting that tracts of such houses are not increasing in value over time. Dealing with their deteriorating carcasses in second and third generation suburbs is increasingly becoming an acute crisis that many American cities have to increasingly deal with.

Yet, it was not too long ago that we knew of a production house that served the needs of successive generations of its users admirably. The California Bungalow was designed in Chicago and Saint Louis and was used as the typical house for the formation of neighborhoods and towns in the United States from 1900 to 1920.

It was light in material, modest in form, unadorned and thoroughly simple in its design, almost modern in its construction. A wooden house, the bungalow was often pre-cut and shipped by rail to the West. It is perhaps the most successful prefabricated house in a century obsessed with prefabrication, despite the chronic failure of the idea.

Its plan was general and designed for repetition. Large rooms were dedicated to public uses, small rooms to private ones. Tall ceilings and large windows brought ample light to its interiors. Bathrooms and sometimes kitchens were up to date. The house and its garden were often connected

into a single architecture through the use of porches. Functionally, the fluidity and generality of the bungalow plan allowed its use by millions of families over time to very diverse living ends. In this, the century that most revolutionized domestic technology and living patterns, the bungalow has been the ultimate flexible dwelling.

Bungalows were of an identifiable house form. Even as duplexes, triplexes or quadruplexes, they stressed their single house precedence. Refined by traditional architectural elements, doors, windows, chimneys, porches, etc they spoke to both a house that nurtured families and to a street that gathered them into a neighborhood. They symbolized a home setting and civic culture that were true to the core of this republic.

Beauty is the recognition of utility well served, design well composed and construction well executed. The beauty of the bungalows is recognized by millions today and exists both for their sheer living pleasure, and for their long term financial gain. In Pasadena, California where I live and work, there are many bungalows in neighborhood configurations that were designed for \$200 one hundred years ago and are now worth over \$400,000.

It is high time to pause and consider the mass housing options available to us today: We must turn 'product' into houses, tracts into neighborhoods and sprawl into towns and cities. The failures and successes of the last century are staring us in the face: Enough is enough.