

TightLines Designs: Providing Great Options for Affordable Housing in Historic Districts

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TightLines Houses on Bloodworth Street, Raleigh, NC

The need for affordable housing is growing in the United States, and one way of addressing this need is through infill housing in historic districts. Providing affordable housing in historic districts may seem like an unlikely solution to this problem, but older neighborhoods provide many benefits that are hard to find elsewhere. Many communities understand the benefits of providing infill affordable housing in historic districts and have chosen to use TightLines Designs houses because of their affordability and historic compatibility.

The Bloodworth Street and Martin Street homes in Raleigh, NC are located in the Southpark National Historic District and were chosen for their compatibility with the character of the district. TightLines houses were also used in the Cooke Street project in Raleigh; Cooke Street is not in a historic district, but the city wanted the homes on Cooke Street to blend with the neighboring Oakwood Historic District. Additionally, three TightLines Designs homes have been used in the revitalization efforts of Goldsboro, NC. Goldsboro and Preservation North Carolina joined together to create a ten-year revitalization plan that focuses on both residential and commercial buildings because these two sectors are mutually dependent. Part of this revitalization plan includes building infill homes on lots where homes had been demolished, and Self Help joined these efforts by building three affordable TightLines houses.

The Benefits of Historic Districts



TightLines Houses on Martin Street, Raleigh, NC

Historic districts provide good neighborhoods for integrating affordable housing with existing housing, and vacant lots in historic districts are excellent sites for new affordable housing for many reasons. Location is incredibly important for affordable housing because too often land costs and other financial factors push affordable housing to outlying areas that are not well connected to jobs and shopping. Historic districts offer families an established context with amenities and diversity of scale of housing stock, and they are often located in the inner-city or near downtown because these neighborhoods were frequently constructed before the exodus of the city-center for outlying suburbs. These central locations mean historic neighborhoods are close to jobs, shopping, and public transportation. Additionally, historic neighborhoods are often diverse socially and economically for two reasons; 1) houses are of quality, scale, and design that appeal to a wide audience and 2) have a variety in sizes, conditions, ages, quality, and prices. The variety often found in historic neighborhoods means that a smaller house can usually successfully fit within the neighborhood context.

Respecting the Character of the District

Both federal and local preservation programs suggest that certain elements should be shared by new and old buildings in historic districts regardless of the style of the new buildings. These elements include: building height, scale, orientation, spacing, site coverage, proportion, window and entrance design, porches, projections, materials, texture, color, roof form, and horizontal, vertical, or non-directional emphasis. Focusing on these elements ensures that new buildings will look new without disrupting the character and continuity of the historic district. Additionally the *National Park Service's Secretary of the Interior's Rehabilitation Standards* 9 and 10 stipulate that new construction should not destroy historic materials, features, or spatial relationships of the property and should be differentiated yet compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale, proportion, and massing. New construction should be completed so that if removed in the future, the integrity of the historic environment will not be affected. To help ensure that infill construction does not disrupt the character of the neighborhood, proposed infill projects in locally zoned historic districts must get a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) from the local preservation commissions as compatible with the district, and infill construction in National Historic Districts will need to be reviewed and approved by the State Historic Preservation Office.

TightLines' Compatibility with Historic Districts



The TightLines houses have many features that make them compatible with historic districts. Most of the TightLines house designs are contemporary interpretations of historic forms. For example, several TightLines houses, including the [Ansley](#), [Bailey](#), and [Bentley](#), are based on the bungalow form. David Maurer of TightLines stresses the importance of consistency within diversity and uses details to tie new designs in with the old. For example, the use of brackets is common in historic districts, and using contemporary brackets in new houses is a way to represent the historic character without imitating the historic homes. Different forms and colors of siding, brackets, and trims may be used, but there should be some consistency between the historic and infill houses.

Materials are also important to consider for infill homes in historic districts; they should be compatible with the existing character. Typically, hardiplank, a fiber-reinforced cement board, is recommended instead of traditional wood clapboards or vinyl siding for TightLines houses. Maurer recommends that the smooth side be used rather than the textured side because the manufactured texture has a forced, uniform appearance, unlike the irregular patterns of layers of old paint on historic homes. Maurer notes that the textured side is often used because it doesn't show imperfections, such as hammer marks, but because the planks are nailed at the top with the next plank slightly overlapping it, the imperfections are covered. For trim, however, Maurer recommends using the textured side because the imperfections cannot be covered, and alternating the textures adds some variety to the exterior of the home.

The Importance of Sustainability

Just as infill should respect the character of a district, it should also respect the environment. Sustainable design also means affordability, so green design plays an essential roll in affordable housing. TightLines houses are designed to be energy efficient, reducing monthly bills, and to have good indoor air quality, resulting in healthier families and less trips to the doctor. In addition, TightLines houses are designed to reduce waste and materials in an effort to benefit communities and future generations.

Contributing to Community



Front porches on Bloodworth Street, Raleigh, NC



Front porches are frequently found in historic districts and add a dimension of community to a neighborhood. TightLines houses include front porches and are designed with a procession from public space to private space from the front to the back of the lot. The front yards are usually smaller, providing space for natural growth and allowing the front porch to be relatively close to the street so that residents can sit on their front porch and interact with neighbors on the street. The public living spaces are at the front of the house so that residents still have a view of what is going on in the neighborhood. This arrangement also helps reduce vandalism and robberies because the house looks inhabited with the front spaces lit up at night as opposed to houses that look dark at night because the public spaces are at the rear.

Communities will have to assess the design and style of infill affordable homes in relation to different neighborhoods to determine what designs are compatible with the historic character. The important factors to consider when building infill houses in historic neighborhoods include: supporting the character of the neighborhood through new construction, building homes that are both affordable upfront as well as in the long run, and designing homes that participate in and contribute to the community and sense of place of the historic districts in which they are built. Historic districts can provide great neighborhoods for infill housing that is affordable and respects the existing character of the neighborhood because, as TightLines Designs' mission statement says, "affordable housing and sustainable design can, and should, coexist."