



# Guide to a Successful Building Project in the Back Bay

Are you planning to change or replace windows, repair a roof deck, or add an electrical vehicle charger? Or planning to update a storefront on Newbury Street or the north side of Boylston Street? Projects like these are subject to preservation rules established in the Back Bay Architectural District. This guide offers an introduction to the regulations of the [Back Bay Architectural Commission \(BBAC\)](#), which approves all exterior changes to buildings in our neighborhood, and a few of the other regulatory agencies involved.

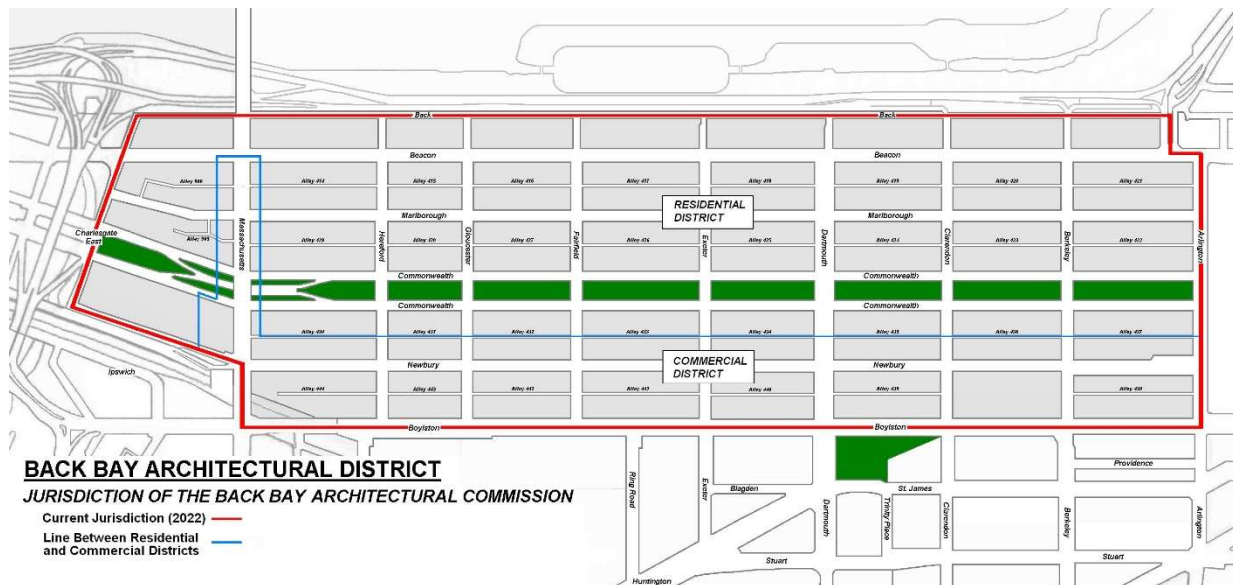


The design process can be relatively quick for smaller projects but can be lengthier and more complicated when several elements are being replaced or altered. The first step is to determine which rules apply.

## Determining Which Rules Apply

Design reviews are required for projects involving the exterior of buildings throughout the Back Bay Architectural District, one of ten local historic districts in Boston. The boundaries of the Back Bay Architectural District were [established by the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1966](#) and have been amended, strengthened, and expanded several times.

If the project lies within the boundaries of the center lines of Back Street on the north, Embankment Road and Arlington Street on the east, Boylston Street on the south and Charlesgate East on the west, as shown by the red boundary on the map below, the project is located with the Back Bay Architectural District and is subject to design review. The design review and approval are prerequisites to get the building permits that will be required from the City of Boston.





The Back Bay Architectural District is divided into two areas, the residential section, and the commercial section, divided along the Commonwealth-Newbury alley and along Massachusetts Avenue, as indicated by the blue line in the map above.

The rules for each part of the Back Bay Architectural District have slightly different emphases. These are compiled in the [Back Bay Design Guidelines](#). There is one set for the residential portion of the district and another for the commercial portion of the district.

If the project is outside of the boundaries set for the Back Bay Architectural District, it is not subject to the district's design review process. Depending on the size or type of project, it may be subject to other city agencies, like the [Boston Planning and Development Agency](#), or require [zoning relief](#).

## Projects Requiring Design Review

The law that created the Back Bay Architectural District also created the [Back Bay Architectural Commission](#), also referred as the Commission, to promote the economic, cultural, educational, and general welfare of the public through high standards of design throughout the Back Bay and through the preservation of the residential portion of the Back Bay area. The BBAC is a division of the City of Boston's Environment Department. It is one of 10 district commissions that share offices and staff with the Boston Landmarks Commission. As a branch of city government, the Commission has regulatory authority and performs the design reviews.

For projects in the district, any change to the **exterior of a property** (including all parts of the building as well as gardens, trees, pathways, and parking areas) must be reviewed and approved by the BBAC before beginning any work. This includes not only work on **front facades and front yards**, but also all work on **rear facades and rear yards**, facing the back alleys or not, and **side facades and yards**. All work on **roofs**, visible or not, is also subject to design review.

**All types of alterations, even repainting a front door the same color as it is today, are subject to review.**

An application must be filed and must receive approval from the BBAC before starting any work. However, simple maintenance or repair projects that are consistent with the guidelines are reviewed by the City staff and are submitted for Administrative Approval by the BBAC without a public hearing. This makes this process fairly quick and simple.

It should not be assumed that projects involving the rehabilitation of existing structures, like redoing a deck to the same dimensions as the previous one, will de-facto receive approval. The existing structure may have been built before the current guidelines, or built without proper approval, or may not have been built according to approved plans. The BBAC may require modifications to the existing structures to bring them closer to compliance with the current guidelines.

Interior modifications don't need to be submitted to the Back Bay Architectural Commission unless they affect the exterior. However, the project owner still needs to apply for permits from Boston's Inspectional Services Department.



## Planning the Project

At the planning stage for the project, it is recommended to review the [Design Guidelines](#) applicable to the area, and to visit the [Back Bay Architectural Commission's online information](#) to ensure the project is compliant with the Guidelines.

To help further in the design, especially if the changes are visible, [The Boston Landmarks Commission](#) has published a [guide to researching historic homes](#) that contains information on how to locate building and alteration permits, newspaper articles, maps, and other print resources.

Also, Back Bay residents are fortunate to have a wealth of information available at [BackBayHouses.org](#) including details about the architects, deeds, and ownership history of all the buildings on the district's residential streets, as well as an overview of the history and development of the neighborhood. [Historic New England](#) has collections of historic photographs, and a section on [tips for homeowners](#). [The Boston Athenaeum](#) has large collections of photographs, which can be seen by appointment and can often provide evidence of the earlier appearance of a building. [The Boston Public Library](#) has digitized several photos from its collection of Boston. They are now hosted on the [Digital Commonwealth](#) and several photos are still [available on Flickr](#).

If the project involves landscaping, or removing trees, it is recommended that the project sponsor contact the [Garden Club of the Back Bay](#). The Garden Club works to preserve, plant, and care for the neighborhood's trees and encourages other horticultural improvements. Any [tree removal](#), in a front, side or rear yard, even in an alley, needs the BBAC approval.

It is advantageous to work with a contractor and, if appropriate, an architect who has done work in the neighborhood and is familiar with the rules.

If the project involves altering dimensions of structures or building new structures, the project may not be compliant with current zoning regulations. To be able to proceed, the project may need to apply for zoning relief from the [Zoning Board of Appeal \(ZBA\)](#). The BBAC will not hear or approve a project until the zoning regulations are met, or a relief has been granted.

If violations already exist on the building, they must be rectified before the proposal is submitted.

In addition, condominium owners need the written approval of the condo association's board of trustees before filing with the BBAC.

Before submitting an application, it is helpful to discuss a project with the [Commission's Director of Design Review](#), who can explain the Commission's practices and precedents.

## The Design Review Process

The Back Bay Architectural Commission evaluates proposed changes according to criteria that include architectural appropriateness, relationship to surrounding buildings and to the neighborhood, visibility, and historical accuracy.



Most applications that are submitted by the monthly deadline are processed by the BBAC at the next hearing. If a proposal is consistent with the guidelines, the BBAC's staff may review it and recommend that the Commission approves it administratively without a hearing. If there is any question about its appropriateness, or it doesn't fully align with the guidelines, a hearing in front of the Commission will be required. The Commission may approve, deny, or recommend modifications to the plans.

The BBAC has posted [relevant information online](#) on the approval process, including details on how to file an application by mail or on-line, dates of hearings, what documentation is required, and fees.

To determine the extent to which changes are visible, the BBAC will often require mockups, temporary structures representing the size of the final structure, to be erected on the site before the review by the Commission.

In preparation for a hearing in front of the BBAC, the [NABB Architecture Committee](#) may ask to review the project at its meeting. The NABB Architecture Committee seeks to preserve and enhance the historic and residential character of the neighborhood. Project sponsors can come to the meeting to present their plans and committee members can offer suggestions that can make the project more likely to be approved by the BBAC. NABB's Architecture Committee meets monthly to review residential and commercial applications to the BBAC and reports its comments to the applicant and to the BBAC before their hearings. The Architecture Committee also occasionally recommends guidelines and policies for the Commission to consider.

## Executing The Project

Once the project has received the approval from the BBAC and a written Certificate of Appropriateness has been issued, a [building permit](#) can be requested from the Inspectional Services Department (ISD) of the City of Boston. The ISD will not issue a permit without the BBAC's approval.

Once the written Certificate of Appropriateness from the Commission is received and the Inspectional Services Department has signed off on the project, construction can begin. Certificates of Appropriateness are valid for one year from the date of issue, although extensions may be granted.

All properties with approved work in the Back Bay Architectural District are required to display their approval placard ([Certificate of Appropriateness](#)) for the duration of the project.

If work is done on the exterior of a building in the Back Bay Architectural District without a Certificate of Appropriateness, a violation notice may be issued by the BBAC, even if a building permit was issued.

- If the work is underway, it could be stopped by the ISD.
- If the work is completed, a violation may be issued by the BBAC that will need to be resolved with the Violations Committee of the Commission. The Violation Committee could decide to require the owner to bring the work into compliance, including redoing it. Until whatever action the Commission decides is completed, the violation will remain open and no other work can be done on the building.

If there is an open violation, it may impede the owner's ability to sell or transfer the property.



## **Preserving and improving for the future.**

The Back Bay is one of the largest well-preserved Victorian neighborhoods in the country, and building owners are its stewards, responsible for its past and its future. Following the rules, guidelines, and the design process will ensure that this beautiful neighborhood is preserved for the whole Boston community and for generations to come.

*The NABB Architecture Committee would like to thank the [Beacon Hill Civic Association](#) for the inspiration for this guide.*