

January 23, 2013

Tom Bonadeo, Town Planner
Town of Cape Charles
Municipal Building
2 Plum Street
Cape Charles, Virginia 23310

Dear Mr. Bonadeo:

On November 20, 2012 the Historic Review Board (HRB) for the Town of Cape Charles declined to issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the current design of the Hotel Cape Charles, as well as proposed modifications, and they indicated that these decisions were final.

Pursuant to the Town of Cape Charles Zoning Ordinance, Article § 8.34, we articulate here our reasons to appeal this decision to the Town Council. We ask that this request for an appeal be included on the Agenda of Town Council meeting on either February 7 or 21 February, 2013.

We request this de novo review as to the determination of "appropriateness" of the current Hotel design within the Historic District. **We respectfully submit that the current Hotel design is appropriate within the Historic District when the *Cape Charles Historic District Guidelines (CCHDG)* are accurately interpreted and applied.** The current record of decision-making by the HRB does not reference Standards within the CCHDG, and as such the denial was based on subjective impressions rather than these Standards and Guidelines. This is the basis for our appeal, and we provide further elaboration below.

We are mindful that the current debate on our pending appeal has raised passions and has become connected to debates on matters other than the Hotel's design appropriateness, including the Echelon development proposal, the role of developers in Cape Charles, and the implication that a "precedent" would be set should the current design be approved at this juncture. It is our hope that the Town Council meeting will focus narrowly and solely on the question posed by our appeal, namely: Is the current design of the Hotel Cape Charles appropriate within the Historic District when analyzed with reference to the *Cape Charles Historic District Guidelines*?

The current *Cape Charles Historic Guidelines* document (CCHDG) is based upon The Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, first issued in 1977. There are nine Secretary Standards incorporated within the CCHDG. Two of these Standards are particularly relevant as to the issue before Town Council, the appropriateness of the Hotel's design in its environment.

Standard #9 of the Guidelines addresses new construction as it relates to existing historic structures and historic environment states: *New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.* (CCHDG, p. 19)

Standard #3 provides guidance on the subject of creating an erroneous sense of history: *Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.* (CCHDG, p. 19)

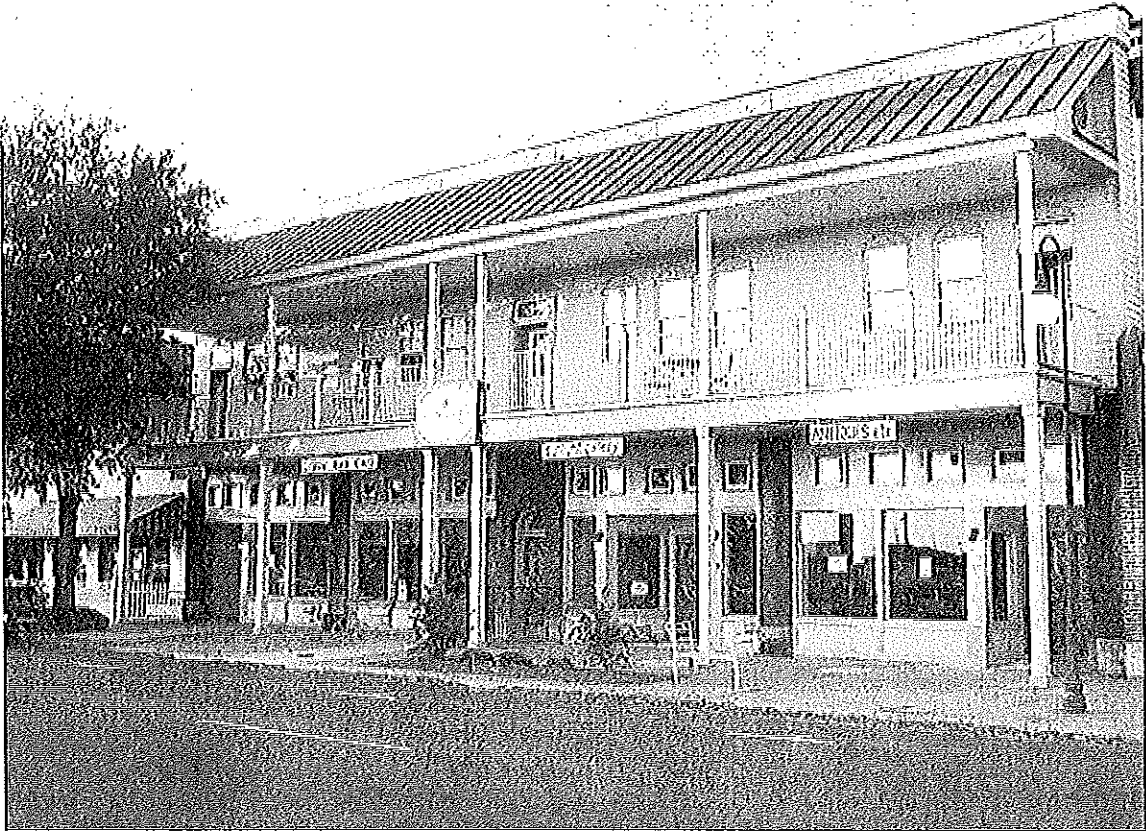
This guideline reflects the reality that often new building work on historic structures involves poor quality reproduction or pastiche design, the result of the mistaken belief that it is considered to be appropriate to blend with the historic building or environment.

The 2005 restoration of the Historic Cape Charles Hotel is an example of a failed effort to blend in with the historic environment; it might be considered a model case for why the Secretary's Standards discourage this approach. The "Historic Cape Charles Hotel" featured the following "historic" elements:

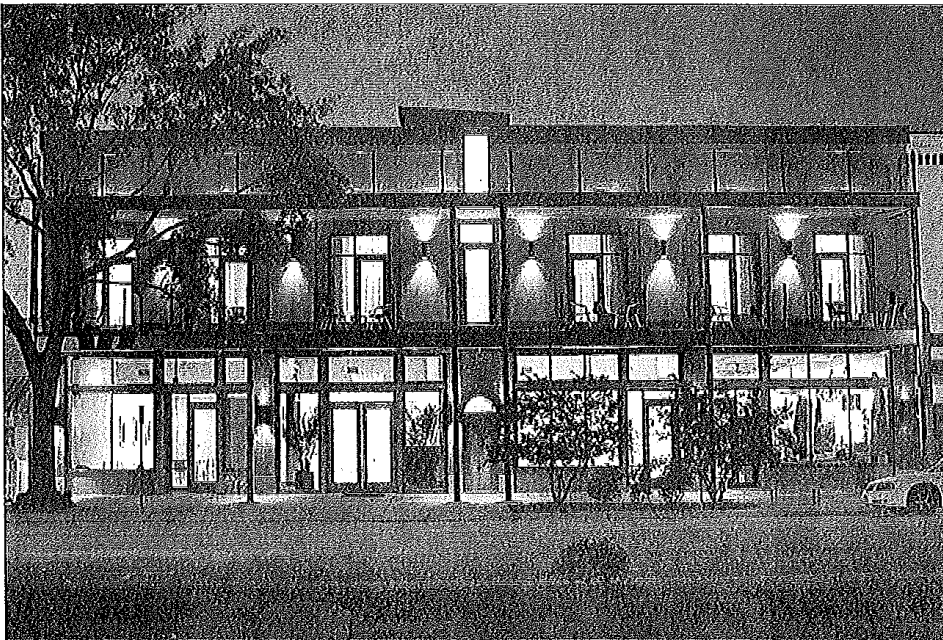
1. Vinyl-clad double-hung and "transom" windows
2. Plastic decorative "fanlights" adhered to siding above the windows
3. Plastic "pressed-tin" ceiling tiles
4. Plastic decorative features adhered to the parapet/cornice
5. Vinyl simulated "Oak" doors with "leaded" glass
6. False architectural metal on the roof and porch
7. Vinyl "beaded" ceiling panels on the porch

The resulting structure can appropriately be described as an architectural travesty and had as much in common with the historic built environment as plastic has to the natural world. The Historic Cape Charles Hotel was almost universally disparaged by town residents and visitors as an eyesore. It was ultimately an unsuccessful venture.

The "Historic Cape Charles Hotel"



The Hotel Cape Charles



Our team's aspiration in designing Hotel Cape Charles in its historic setting was to match the quality of the new with the old so that they are each respected and enhanced for the benefit of those who live in and visit Cape Charles. We believe the end result is juxtaposition of age and stature - the new and bold standing with the vintage and adored.

By virtue of several previous renovations and at least one major fire, 235 Mason Avenue had no original remaining historic façade elements other than the brick pilasters. Thus, our strategy was to add new elements in a closely related style, sustaining a sense of continuity in architectural language.

Examples of these efforts include:

1. Retain and highlight the brick pilasters, the only original elements remaining on the façade
2. The use of concrete-based panels to infill and reference the original masonry façade
3. The redesign and installation of true transom windows on the ground level
4. The use of natural wood details in conjunction with architectural metals
5. The retention of the bulkheads in proportion to surrounding structures
6. The design and installation of a simple cornice detail in proportion to surrounding structures
7. Articulation of the façade with distinct commercial bays

The Cape Charles Historic District contains buildings in many different styles, and most recent renovations follow an approach to design that is transitional. In other words, there are very few buildings that retain most of their original historic details and contemporary construction materials, and designs are inconsistent throughout the streetscape. **The Hotel Cape Charles current design pulls together many of the disparate elements that currently exist on Mason Avenue.**

We sought and utilized the most complementary high-quality materials (hardwoods, powder-coated aluminum, and glass) to create a striking example of an in-fill rehabilitation that is compatible and appropriate within the fabric of Mason Avenue's varied architectural styles. These materials and this design draw on the influences of Cape Charles and harmonize with, rather than rupture, the continuity of the street's architectural character.

Our primary intent was to achieve a balance between differentiation and compatibility but weighted in favor of the latter. **What makes buildings from different eras and styles compatible is that they share the same underlying principles of space, structure, elements, composition, proportion, and character.** The Hotel Cape Charles achieves this compatibility in each of these respects. Compatibility, however, should not be misunderstood to mean "uniformity."

The *Cape Charles Historic District Guidelines* are basic guidelines to guide and inform the review of designs and permit wide latitude and discretion in the review and interpretation of appropriateness. The HRB deliberations do not indicate that the Standards from the *Guidelines* document were used as a basis for denial of the Certificate of Appropriateness.

The following statements are representative of the reasoning utilized during the HRB deliberations:

"It's our job to make sure that historic properties in town maintain their character."

"It looks too open. It doesn't look safe."

"You are asking us to set a precedent."

"Is there something we could do to make it more sympathetic to the other buildings on the street?"

Our belief is that the decision to deny the Hotel Cape Charles a Certificate of Appropriateness was made without reference to the Secretary's Standards that should form the basis for such determinations. Specifically, there has been an absence of deliberations with respect to the design's consistency with Standard's #9 and #3.

At this juncture, the appropriateness of this design has become distilled to a single issue, the presence of second-floor glass balconies. The HRB's proposal to adhere pickets to the glass balconies is, in our estimation, both unnecessary and architecturally and aesthetically unwarranted in the Mason Avenue streetscape. The CCHDG have no criteria pertaining to porches or porch treatments in the Historic Business District. There are no buildings on Mason Avenue with historic balconies, porches, or pickets. The existing porches on Mason Avenue are the product of contemporary renovations that use mostly contemporary materials, designs, and construction methods. **Thus, we submit to Town Council, that the mandate of the HRB to add pickets constitutes an attempt to make the building comport with buildings that in fact do not have historic elements – we would be attempting to mimic non-historical renovations that occurred prior to the creation of the HRB.**

This approach and this rationale are precisely why the Secretary's Standards specifically admonish that additions and new construction should be distinct and discernible as such—and not seek to create "a false sense of history." During our review, the HRB did not apply or consult CCHDG; had the Board done so, the review would have focused upon this Hotel design's adherence to the Secretary's Standards and the Hotel's resulting compatibility with the diverse architectural vernacular on Mason Avenue.

The Hotel's design—and specifically its compatibility with the surrounding environment—have in fact been the basis for wide critical acclaim during the Hotel's inaugural season (*Washington Post*, *Hampton Roads magazine*, *USA Today*, *New York Magazine*).

The owners and staff of the Hotel Cape Charles ask that the Cape Charles Town Council approve the current design and issue a "Certificate of Appropriateness" so that the Hotel may continue operation and continue its substantial contributions to the life and commerce of this wonderful town. We feel that the Hotel Cape Charles is the epitome of thoughtful and compatible design within the environment.

When the Town was founded, its citizens worked hard to build up a community based on high standards, including high-quality lodgings, restaurants, and shops of many kinds, most of which served the throngs of travelers who passed through town because of the ferry service. It was a time of marvelous prosperity and industry, and Cape Charles was the talk of the East Coast for its charm as a stopover or even a place to summer.

We share the Town Council's similar vision for the rebirth of Cape Charles, and we believe that the two thousand satisfied guests hosted by the Hotel in 2012, our critical acclaim in the media, and the 400+ petition signatures we submit herewith are all evidence that the Hotel, in its current incarnation, is

already an engine for positive change that is fully compatible with our shared vision and our common hope for a return of the Town to prosperity and quality, which is its legacy and almost certainly its near future. The Hotel made manifest its commitment to the Town and to its fellow businesses in many other ways in its first year, and we intend to make 2013 even more successful.

Using the *Cape Charles Historic District Guidelines*, the Town Council has much latitude to decide what is "appropriate" in the Historic District, and it is our hope that we have demonstrated both architectural compatibility and the legal conformity in our comments above. We are at your disposal to reply to any questions with regard to the issues related to this appeal, and we thank you kindly for your consideration of the matter.

Yours very sincerely,

David and Kathryn Gammino