While roofing materials play a key functional role for any building, the selection of roofing materials is also an aesthetic choice. The form, color, pattern, and texture of roofing materials help define a building’s character. But roofing also represents a significant cost and investment, leading to the development of new roof cladding materials that can imitate the appearance of historic materials. Denver Landmark Preservation frequently receives applications for alternative roofing materials as property owners look for materials that cost less, are easier to install, or weigh less than traditional roofing materials.

In fall 2020, the Denver Landmark Preservation Commission received an application to replace a deteriorated historic concrete tile roof with a metal tile roof at 777 Vine Street located within the East Seventh Avenue Historic District. Developed in the first few decades of the twentieth century, this residential district includes elaborate Revival styles mixed with Foursquares and Bungalow. Tile roofs (clay and concrete) are featured on many of the Revival style residences.

777 Vine Street is a unique residential property which started as a carriage house. The carriage house was constructed circa 1905 and around 1921 was incorporated into a larger residential structure. In 1934, the residence was further enlarged with a wing to the north, designed by prominent Denver architect W.E. Fisher. At this time, the house was given a unified appearance with the installation of concrete tile roofing across the structure. The French style tile was painted green. The original tile manufacturer has not been identified, but contemporary concrete tile similar to that used on this property is still available. In this case, however, the applicant proposed a lighter weight metal tile as a replacement due to concerns with the ability of the roof framing in the original portion of the house to continue to support the weight of concrete tile.
Landmark staff visited the property to discuss potential roof replacement options. Both the use of replacement metal tile only on the roof of the original portion of the house as well as the replacement of the entire roof were discussed. Staff were concerned with using multiple roofing materials since this would destroy the unified appearance of the residence. Staff, though, were also concerned with the ability of the metal tile to replicate the appearance of the concrete tile.

The Landmark Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures and Districts provided the following guidance for evaluating the application:

2.12 Replace architectural features that cannot be repaired.
   b. Use a design that is substantiated by physical or pictorial evidence to avoid creating a misrepresentation of the structure’s history. The replacement must match the original in material, composition, design, color, texture and other visual qualities.
   c. Use the same kind of material as the original detail when feasible.
   d. An alternative material may be acceptable if the size, shape, texture and finish conveys the visual appearance of the original.

2.25 Repair original roof materials and features and replace only when necessary.
   c. If replacement is necessary, use original materials whenever possible. The use of original materials is particularly critical for landmark structures, or structures where the original material is important to the landmark or district designation.
   d. If matching materials are not available or feasible, choose alternative materials, with a matching or closely matching appearance.

Based on these guidelines, landmark staff recommended that the commission deny the application. Photos submitted with the application documented that the existing roof was in poor condition and in need of replacement. But landmark staff did not find the proposed metal replacement tile – CertainTeed Matterhorn Metal Tile – to be a close
match for the historic tile roofing (CertainTeed dis-
continued the Matterhorn metal roofing line at the
end of 2020). 777 Vine Street, though substantial
in size, is simple in design and decoration. Staff
found the historic concrete tile roofing to be one of
the house’s most distinctive elements and a char-
acter-defining feature. Tile roofing is also a historic
feature of the East Seventh Avenue Historic District.

The historic tile at 777 Vine Street featured a
French tile design with small, flattened barrels,
spaced close together, while the replacement tile
featured a much larger and rounder barrel with
more widely spaced barrels. The metal tile was
larger in dimensions (21” x 14” compared to
10.75” x 15” for the historic tile), was thinner
(3/4” compared to 1 3/8” for the historic tile),
featured taller barrels (1.5” tall compared to .75”
for the historic tile), had wider barrels (4.5” com-
pared to 2.75” for the historic tile) and used more
widely spaced barrels (the center-to-center distance
between barrels was 9.25” for the metal tile com-
pared to 4.75” for the historic tile). Staff was also
concerned about the difference in finish with the
concrete tile having a rougher, more textured finish
than the smooth metal tile. However, the color of
the proposed replacement tile was a close match to
the original tile color. Additionally, since the house
began as a carriage house, it was set at the back
of the lot, reducing the visibility of the residence
from public vantage points within the district.

When the landmark preservation commission
reviewed the project, commissioners expressed
concern that the proposed replacement tile lacked
the depth and articulation of the historic concrete
tile. The commission also determined that the ap-
plicant did not sufficiently establish that the roof of
the original portion of the house could not continue
to support the weight of concrete tile or that the re-
placement proposed was the best match available.
The commission voted to continue the application,
requesting additional information. The commission
requested an assessment of the roof by a struc-
tural engineer experienced with historic buildings
including an evaluation of the feasibility of adding
support to the roof such as sistering, new headers,
etc. For the tile, the commission requested informa-

Aerial view of 777 Vine St. showing historic concrete tile.
When the applicant later presented an expanded application, the commission found that sufficient evidence had been submitted to document that the replacement of the historic concrete tile roof with the proposed metal tile roof was the most feasible option. While concrete tile which closely matched the historic tile was available, it was not a feasible option given the condition of the existing roof structure and the weight of the concrete tile.

And while the proposed metal roof tile was not a close match for the historic concrete tile, it was the best match of the lighter weight roofing products available. However, in their deliberation, the commission made it clear that this metal roofing was being approved due to the unique challenges and conditions at this property and did not establish a precedent for other reroofing applications. They also stated that they did not find the work as proposed to qualify for Colorado’s historic preservation tax credit.

In Colorado, CLGs are given the authority to review state residential tax credit applications. Historic tax credits are financial incentives for residential rehabilitation projects that require property owners to follow certain preservation standards. Unlike mandatory design review, applying for the
tax credits is a voluntary process in which owners agree to pursue a project that meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. The underlying intent of the tax credit program and use of the Standards is to provide an incentive to preserve and maintain significant historic materials and features of a building during a rehabilitation. Thus, the commission may hold projects applying for tax credits to a higher standard since this is a preservation incentive versus a regulatory review. The commission determined that, while the applicant had established that there were extenuating circumstances justifying the approval of the design review application, the proposed metal tile did not meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation since it would have been possible to reinforce the roof and use a concrete tile that closely matched the original.

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