

Reconnaissance Survey Of Superblock/Apartment Projects In Charlotte-Mecklenburg

Dr. Dan L. Morrill

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A. Statement of Purpose.

This report identifies and preliminarily assesses the relative importance of extant Superblock/Garden Apartment projects in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County that were built in 1965 or earlier. The purpose is to allow the Historic Landmarks Commission to have a context within which to compare the special significance of each Superblock/Garden Apartment project so that a comprehensive approach can be made toward recommending Superblock/Garden Apartment projects for historic landmark designation. This report operates upon the assumption that Superblock/Garden Apartment projects take their importance not from the design of individual buildings but from the arrangement of the totality of spaces and structures in the project and from the styles of the buildings in aggregate.

B. Historical Background.

[Ebenezer Howard](#) (1850-1928), a prominent British urban planner, published a book in 1898, later entitled *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, in which he presented a new vision of cities that would combine the best aspects of rural life and town life. He advocated the creation of carefully planned suburban communities of limited size that would contain no slums and that would introduce large swaths of green space into multi-family housing complexes nestled amongst large blocks or "Superblocks." In the 1920s, especially in Weimar Germany, architects seeking commissions from Social Democratic governments began to experiment with Superblocks as the design vocabulary of public housing in cities such as Cologne, Frankfurt, and Berlin. German architects [Ernst May](#) and [Bruno Taut](#) were leaders in this effort and were deeply influenced by the [Bauhaus](#) and by Swissman [Le Corbusier's](#) concept of the "[Radiant City](#)."

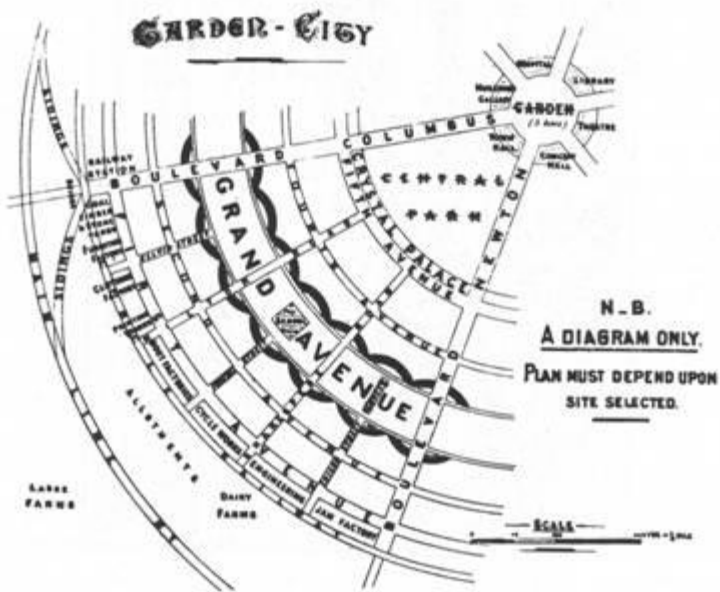


Fig. 3. Ebenezer Howard, *Garden-City: Grand Avenue*, 1902, in *Garden Cities of To-morrow*.

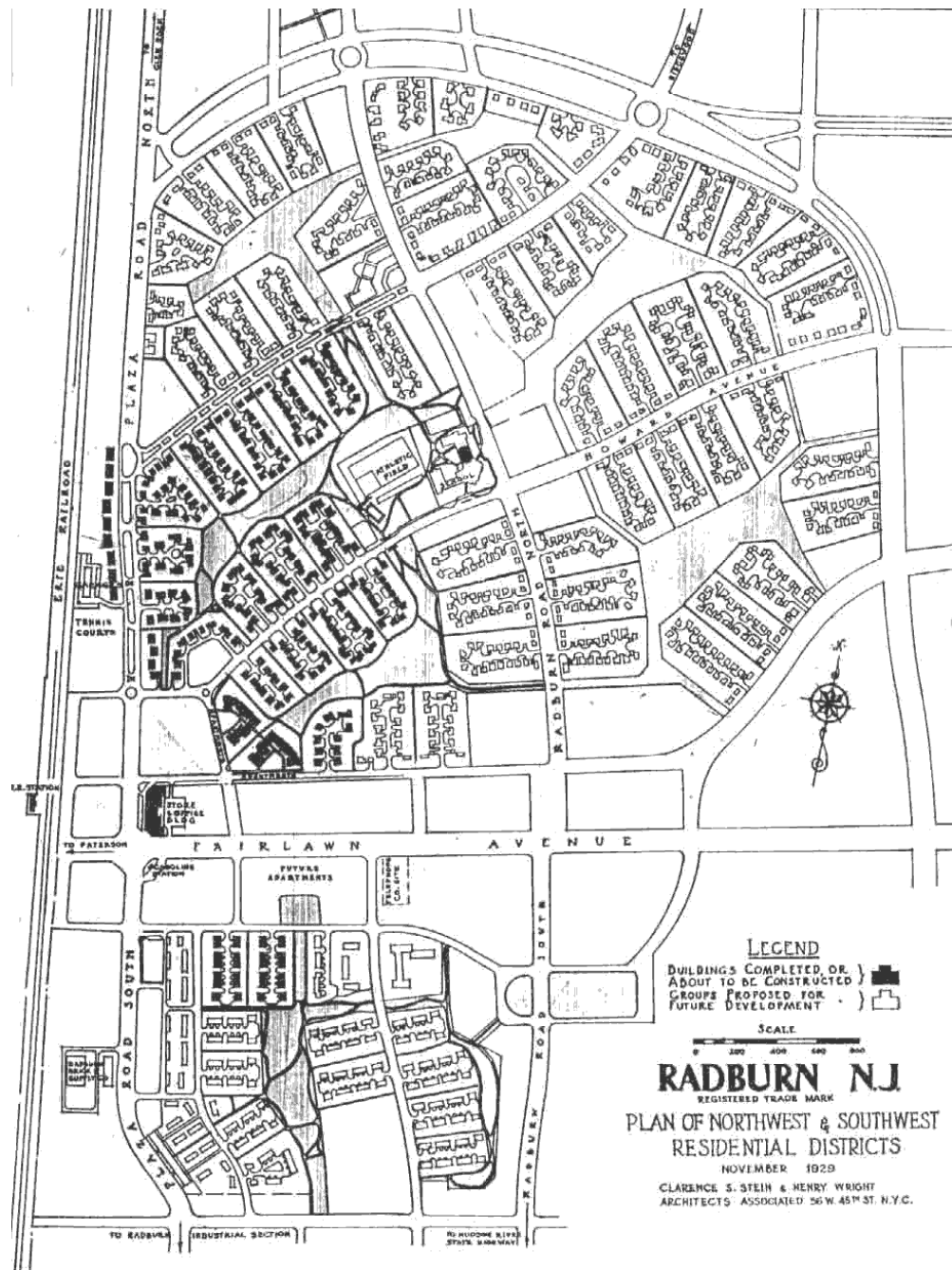
Ebenezer Howard



Garden Apartment designed in 1920s by Bruno Taut in Berlin. Note the similarity with the Myrtle Apartments in Charlotte.

The first architects in the United States to borrow heavily from Howard's concepts, especially the Superblock, were New Yorkers [Clarence Stein](#) and [Henry Wright](#) in their 1928 plan for [Radburn](#), an unincorporated new town in Fair Lawn, New Jersey which opened in 1929 about 18 miles from New York City. In Radburn all fast-moving traffic was restricted to feeder roads. One side of the houses was accessible from the street, and the other side of the houses opened onto communal gardens that had pathways leading to a central park. Stein and Wright were attempting to confront the automobile and encourage face-to-face interaction between the residents. Noted urban critic

Lewis Mumford called Radburn "the most forward step in town planning since Venice."



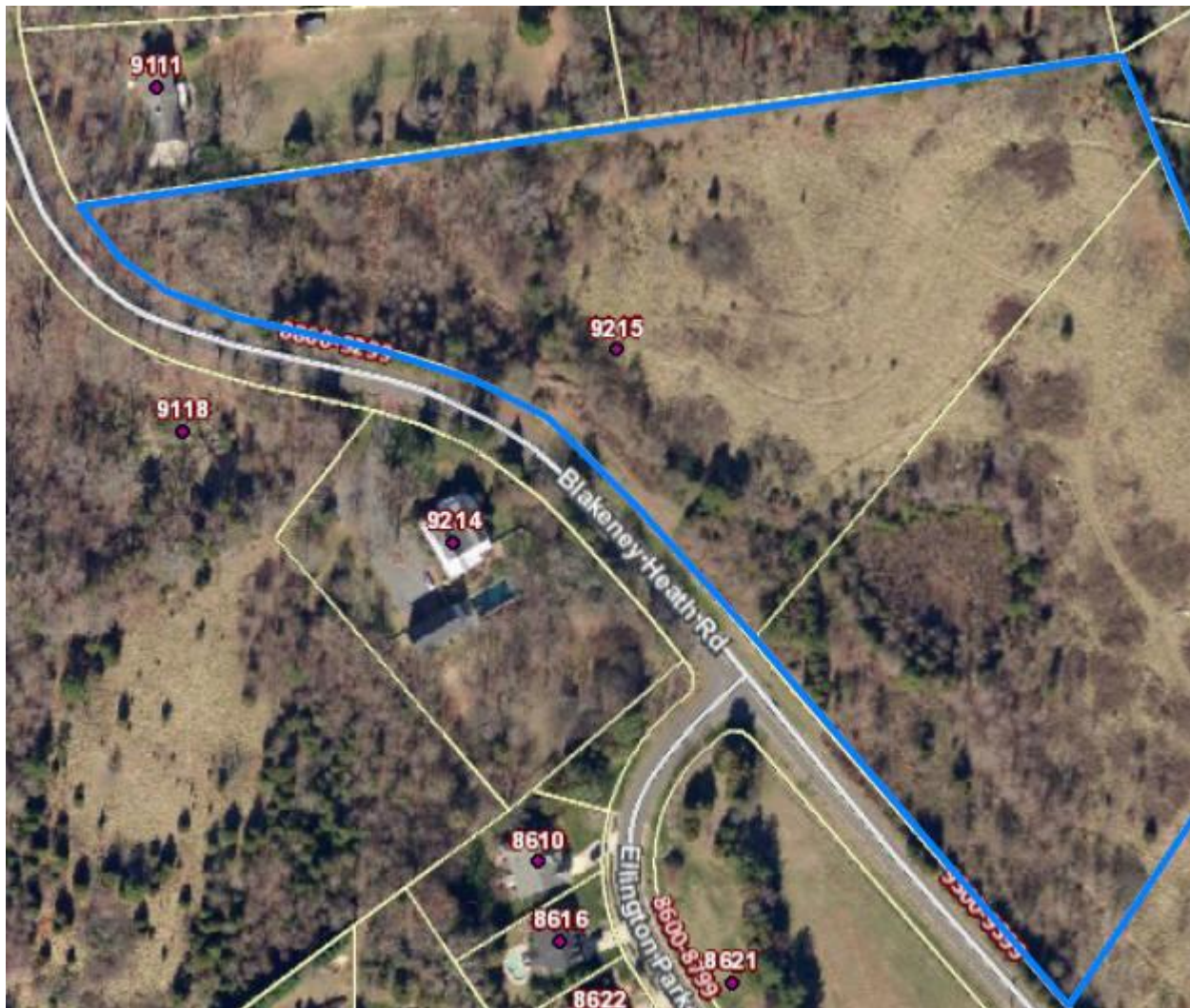
Stein and Wright rejected the grid in favor of cul-de-sacs. Note how the houses are clustered on cul-de-sacs with large amounts of green space intermingled in the all-residential section of the community. Pathways lead to a commercial complex depicted on the lower left-hand corner of the drawing.



Pathway in Radburn

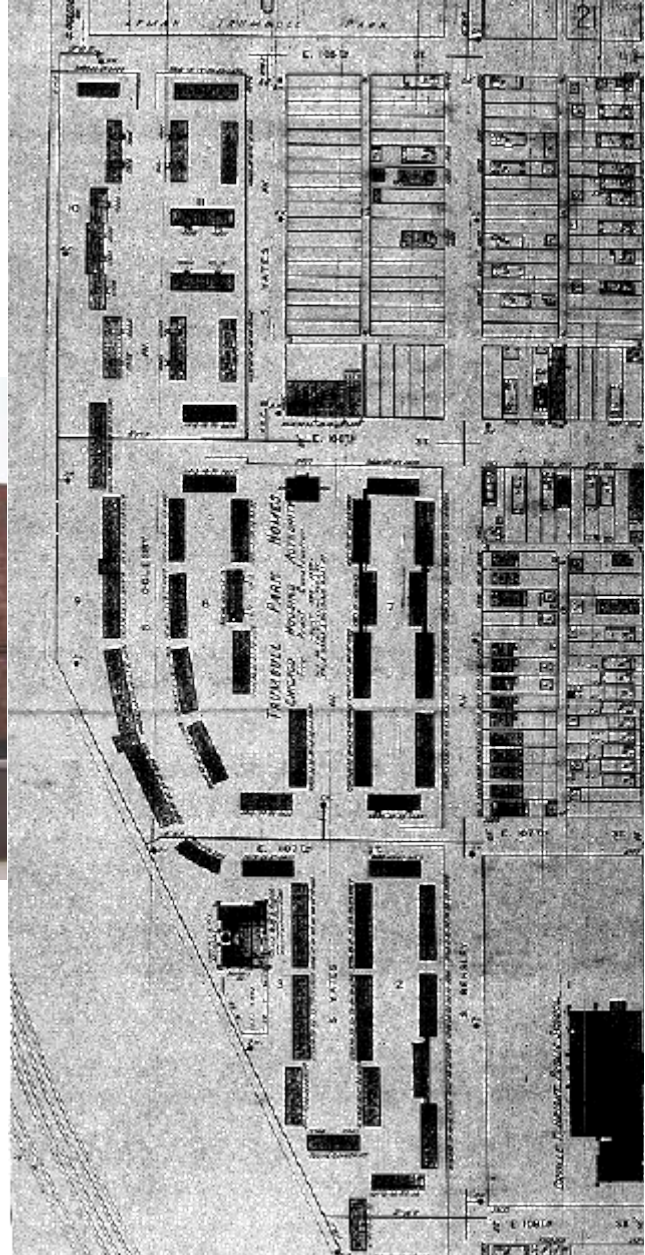


Clustering houses on small lots allowed for large amounts of green space.



The central idea was to cluster the houses together into superblocks, where the fronts of the houses were off a dead-end street. The backs were joined together by footpaths leading to a central green area. This was an adaptation of ideas at [Letchworth, Herts](#) in England.

In the 1930's, President Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal undertook to eradicate slums from urban America. The predominant design philosophy employed in public housing was also the Superblock/Garden Apartment -- concentrating housing into apartment buildings with green space interspersed into the project. Superblock/Garden Apartment public housing developments were constructed by the Public Works Administration in Chicago and other cities in the 1930s, including the Trumbull Park Homes (1936) and the Jane Addams Homes (1938). Private apartment complexes also began to adopt the Superblock/Garden Apartment philosophy, especially in suburbs throughout the United States.



Jane Addams Homes -- Chicago 1938 Trumbull Park Homes -- Chicago 1936

C. Superblock Projects In Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

Charlotte has many striking examples of Superblock/Garden Apartment communities, many of which have been converted into condominiums and most of which are revivalist in terms of architectural style. Indicative of Charlotte's commitment to the Superblock/Garden Apartment philosophy was Piedmont Courts, which opened in 1940 as the City's first public housing project. The architect of the buildings was Martin Evans Boyer, Jr., who had designed many of the finer homes in such elegant suburbs as Eastover and Myers Park. The landscape architect was Harold Bursley, who had recently assisted in the

planning of Greenbelt Maryland, a pioneer "green town." Bursley had worked for landscape architect Earle Sumner Draper before assuming control of the firm in 1933. A nephew of noted Charlotte architect J. M. McMichael, Boyer was reared in Charlotte and was regarded in the 1920s and 1930s as Charlotte's "finest revivalist architect."

To summarize, the essentials of Superblock/Garden Apartments are the placement of automobiles, including parking, on the periphery of the site and having an expansive green space into which the residents can walk. Also, buildings are usually substantial in number, no more than two or three-stories in height, and have repetitive designs with minimal variation between them.

1. Myrtle Apartments -- Dilworth

The most elegant of Charlotte's privately developed Superblock/Garden Apartment projects and the oldest is the Myrtle Apartments in Dilworth. Constructed by 1939, the Art Moderne style Myrtle Apartments is in the Dilworth National Register Historic District. The exterior of the buildings and the grounds possess a high degree of integrity. Staff believes that the Myrtle Apartments, which is now condominiums, has the requisite special significance to warrant placement on the Study List for historic landmark designation. [Click here for aerial photograph.](#)



Myrtle Apartments -- 1930s

2. Piedmont Courts -- Belmont

Piedmont Courts opened in 1940 and was the City of Charlotte's first public housing project. Like many public housing projects of that era, Piedmont Courts adopted the Superblock plan. Built during the years of legal racial segregation, Piedmont Courts was originally only for whites. Fairview Homes, now destroyed, was built only for blacks. Piedmont Courts is now abandoned and scheduled for total demolition. Staff believes that Piedmont Courts has the requisite special significance to warrant placement on the Study List for historic landmark designation. [Click here for aerial photograph.](#)



Piedmont Courts -- 1940

3. Martha Washington Apartments -- Elizabeth

The Martha Washington Apartments, still used as apartments, was erected in 1940. The interior green spaces of this Superblock/Garden Apartment retain a high degree of integrity. Staff believes that the Martha Washington Apartments has the requisite special significance to warrant placement on the Study List for historic landmark designation. [Click here for aerial photograph.](#)



Martha Washington Apartments -- 1940

4. Weyland Apartments -- West Charlotte

One of the best preserved local examples of a Superblock/Garden Apartment is the Weyland Apartments off Wilkinson Boulevard. It was built in 1951 by Lex Marsh, a prominent Charlotte real estate executive. The buildings still function as apartments. The arrangement of the buildings and the grounds is essentially original. Staff believes that the Weyland Apartments has the requisite special significance to warrant placement on the Study List for historic landmark designation. [Click here for aerial photograph.](#)



Weyland Apartments -- 1951

5. Morningside Apartments -- East Charlotte

Morningside Apartments, built in 1949-50 by Dwight Phillips, a prominent local businessman, exhibits the essential qualities of the Superblock/Garden Apartment. Its importance as a garden apartment, however, has been compromised by the addition or initial construction of parking lots in some of what were originally intended to be interrupted interior courtyard spaces. Staff believes that the Morningside Apartments has the requisite special significance to warrant designation as a historic landmark. [Click here for aerial photograph.](#)



Morningside Apartments -- 1949-50

6. Sedgefield Apartments -- Sedgefield

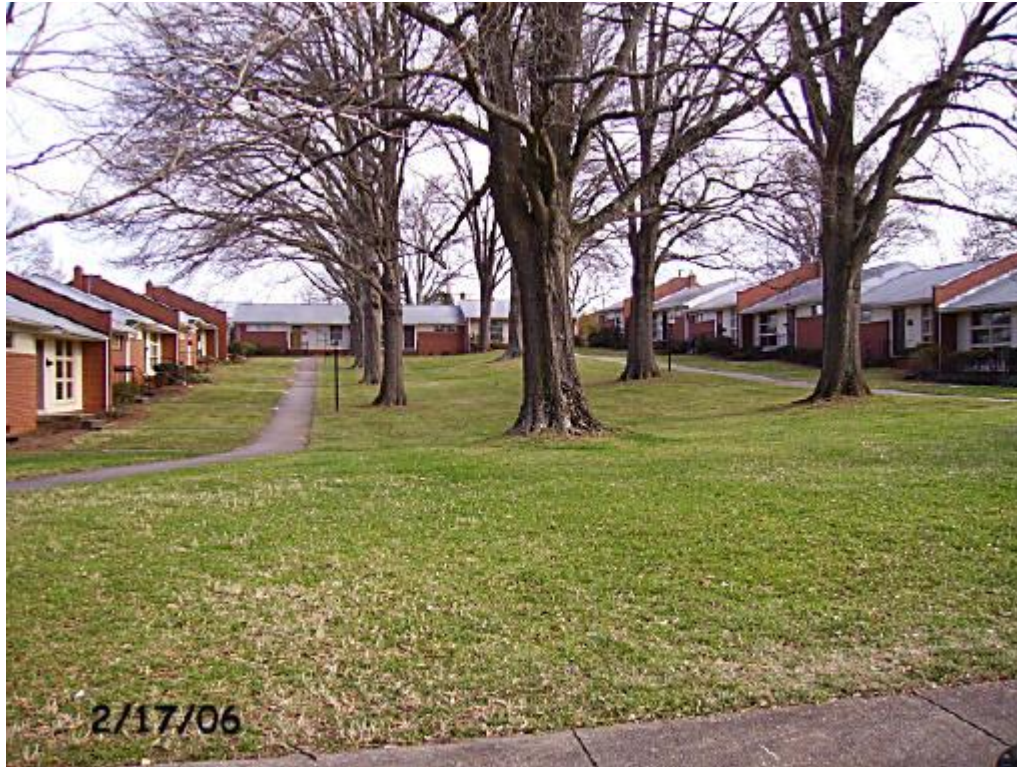
The Sedgefield Apartments was constructed by March 1953 and possesses the essential features of a Superblock/Garden Apartment. The Sedgefield Apartments has been judged eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Staff believes that the Sedgefield Apartments has the requisite special significance to warrant placement on the Study List for historic landmark designation. [Click here for aerial photograph.](#)



Sedgefield Apartments -- c. 1950

7. Cotswold Homes -- Cotswold

[Cotswold Homes](#) was built c. 1954 and was included in the properties judged eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a result of a [post World War Two Survey](#) conducted by the Historic Landmarks Commission. The Cotswold Homes has been transformed into condominiums. Staff believes that the Cotswold Homes has the requisite special significance to warrant placement on the Study List for historic landmark designation. [Click here for aerial photograph.](#)



Cotswold Homes -- c. 1954

8. Selwyn Village Apartments -- South Charlotte

[Selwyn Village](#) Apartments was constructed sometime before 1950 and exhibits the essential qualities of a Superblock/Garden Apartment. It was included in the properties judged eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a result of a [post World War Two Survey](#) conducted by the Historic Landmarks Commission. The Selwyn Apartments has been transformed into condominiums. Staff believes that the Selwyn Apartments has the requisite special significance to warrant placement on the Study List for historic landmark designation. [Click here for aerial photograph.](#)



Selwyn Village Apartments -- 1940s

D. Staff Recommendation.

Staff recommends that the Commission consider most carefully whether it wishes to process properties for historic landmark designation over the stated opposition of owners. The reason is essentially an issue of wise use of resources, both financial and human. There is a considerable amount of time and expense involved in gathering all materials to present properties at a joint public hearing with the appropriate local governing board. All owners and tenants must be notified of the public hearing. The North Carolina Division of Archives and History must issue a comment letter. Ordinances and resolutions must be drawn and filed. Comment letters must be sought from City and County departments, plus a lot more. It is true that if the Commission votes to recommend designation it can delay the demolition of the prospective historic landmark for up to 180 days or until such time as the local governing board holds the joint public hearing, whichever occurs first.

History suggests that a local governing board, unless it initiates the designation process, is most unlikely to designate a property over owner opposition. If the property is not

designated, its demolition is in no way delayed or prevented. Even if it is designated, the owner need only wait 365 days to demolish the property unless the local governing board is willing to use the power of eminent domain to acquire the property. In short, in almost all instances it is the owner of a property who determines its ultimate fate.

Staff believes that in view of the above the Commission should consider the relative importance of the prospective historic landmark when considering whether to recommend designation over owner opposition. The policy might read:

The Historic Landmarks Commission will consider the relative historical and cultural significance of a prospective historic landmark when determining whether it will recommend the designation of the prospective historic landmark and will only recommend designation over owner opposition, unless the appropriate local governing board directs the Commission to do so, if the prospective historic landmark is an outstanding example of its type and retains its essential character defining features.