

17.0 CHELSEA HEIGHTS CHARACTER AREA

The Chelsea Heights subdivision is located in unincorporated DeKalb County west of the City of Decatur in the east central area of Druid Hills Local Historic District.

The Chelsea Land Company began platting property to the east of the Clifton Road area of Druid Hills as early as 1912-1913. The company owned a fairly large parcel of land that extended to the railroad and east of the railroad. Chelsea Heights subdivision, located west of the railroad, was platted in 1914 by the Realty Engineering Company (recorded in Plat Book 4 Page 32). Street and home construction did not commence until the mid-1920s and 1930s with the overwhelming majority of homes being constructed during the late 1940s through the mid-1950s. Significant changes were made to the 1914 plat when the neighborhood was developed, including the consolidation of most of the original platted 50 foot lots into larger building lots. Further, two of the platted road connections were not fulfilled on the ground: Hertford Circle does not connect to Chelsea Circle and Chelsea Circle does not connect to Hummingbird Lane. With the exception of the eastern section of Dyson Drive that has a revised plat recorded in 1950, none of the revised and enlarged lots were recorded with the county.

The subdivision is unassuming in character and has a compact curvilinear street pattern influenced by neighboring Druid Hills. The neighborhood features rolling terrain and an established pine and oak forest canopy that shades the majority of the homes in the area and creates a lush backdrop for modest historic Minimal Traditional and non-historic Ranch-style homes. The Minimal-traditional homes are found throughout the neighborhood but they are most prevalent along the main thoroughfare of Coventry Road, and its “feeder” streets of Vickers, Heaton Park and Dyson Drives, where they constitute the bulk of the early built and historic homes that follow the original platting pattern of 50 foot lots. These homes likely were built to conform with the ideals as set forth by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in their *Principles of Planning Small Houses* and the small house program of the early 40s. The non-historic Ranch-style homes prevalent throughout the rest of the Chelsea Heights subdivision constitute a strong divergence from the architectural, platting, and landscaping ideals represented by the small house program. These homes represent the growing affluence of the 50s and 60s and the general fascination with the “West Coast” lifestyle. In the areas of Chelsea Heights where these homes are prevalent, the original 50-foot lots typically were aggregated to form lots with widths at the street from 75 to 150 feet. In addition, the landscape design associated with these homes emphasize an integration of the indoor and outdoor living spaces with terraces and patios becoming integral to “outdoor living”. In Chelsea Heights this new relation to the landscape resulted in more intimate garden spaces near the home with, planting of many large trees away from the home to reinforce the horizontal and vertical planes that are an integral part of the architectural heritage of these homes.

Finally, while the Minimal Traditional and Ranch styles predominate in Chelsea Heights, other styles including those influenced by the Bungalow movement, the Cape Cod and Contemporary exist and were built more than 50 years from today (2008).



Chelsea Heights Neighborhood, based on 2006 tax-parcel information. Notice the bimodal nature of development in the subdivision with the original “50 foot” lots located along the main thoroughfare of Coventry Road and its “feeder” streets and the much larger “combined” lots of later construction elsewhere in the subdivision.

GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout this document reference is made to both **guidelines** and **recommendations**. The term guideline is used to denote a requirement. A guideline may occasionally be waived but, only rarely and under the most exigent circumstance. The term recommendation is used to denote a “best practice” for meeting specific guidelines, as well as meeting the ideals as set forth in the guidelines and the historic preservation ordinance. Often, recommendations should be viewed as a possible way to meet the requirements of the guidelines or the intent of the ordinance—although not the only way.

CHARACTER-DEFINING FEATURES

Site and Landscape Characteristics:

Front Setback

Varies from 20' to 60' with the typical setback in the 25-40' range.

Side Setback

Generally greater than 10'.

Typical Lot Size:

Lots vary in size, shape and dimension because 1) the curvilinear street pattern in the neighborhood creates irregularly shaped and often larger corner lots and 2) many but not all of the original platted 1914 lots were enlarged and/or combined when the homes in the neighborhood were constructed during the years between the mid-1920s and the 1950s.

Existing lot dimensions range from 37'-150' wide to 100'-203' deep.

Existing lot acreage ranges from .11 acres to .90 acres; typical lot size is approximately 3 acres.

Typical Building Size:

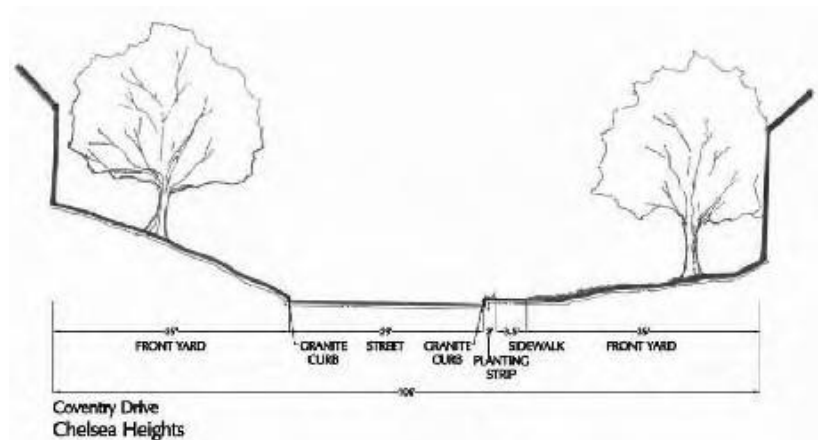
900 to 4,000+ square foot range; typical house in the 1,700-1,800 square foot range.

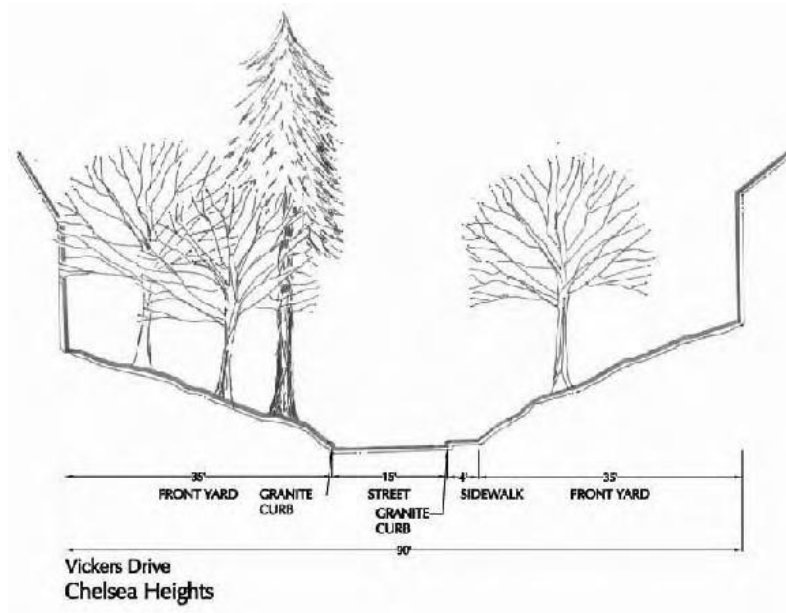
Percentage of Lot Coverage (Home to Lot):

Lot Coverage varies substantially throughout the neighborhood from 5 to 54 %. More typical however is the occurrence of lots with 15 to 20% coverage. During the early development period relatively small homes were built on relatively small lots, later this gave way to relatively large homes on relatively large lots, in both cases the proportion of lot coverage remained relatively constant.

Streetscape:

Variable width asphalt street, granite curb, planting strip, 3 ½ - 4' sidewalk, retaining walls in front yard space. Limited sidewalks, frequently one side, some newer additions at edge of road with no curb, narrow grass strip in some locations with older sidewalks. Street facing garages and carports occur intermittently throughout Chelsea Heights.





Other

Masonry elements:

Granite, cast concrete, cement skimmed concrete block, and rarely, brick or concrete block retaining walls, granite with some cement, curbing; field stone, cement and brick entrance walks, and stairs, brick and rarely granite mailbox piers.

Drives and parking

Paved access drive, typically concrete with drive terminating in a side yard parking pad or street-facing attached garage on the Minimal Traditional homes or for the Ranch Style home the drive terminating in side or back yard parking pads, or in attached street-facing carports or garages. Original, detached garages do occur but are atypical.

Front yard spaces

For the Minimal Traditional homes small open lawns with some trees; For the Ranch-style homes there are also small open lawns but most are wooded with abundant pine and oak trees.

Signage

Wrought iron street name and way-finding signs.

Parks:

Heaton Park is an original feature in the middle of the neighborhood; there is also a small park in middle of Chelsea Circle & Hertford Circle and another bordered by Hummingbird Lane and Hertford Circle.

Building Characteristics:

Scale

Relative to one another houses in Chelsea Heights are either small, in keeping with the FHA small house principles or large in keeping with the low rambling floor plans associated with ranch-style houses (these are nowhere near the scale of National Register Character Area #1 homes). All of the Minimal-traditional houses along Coventry Road appear from the street as 1 to 1 ½ stories with some basements and basement parking. In the areas where ranch houses dominate the houses are typically 1 story with or without a finished basement, however there are a number of 1½ to 2 story and split-level houses included in areas where ranches are the dominant style.

Type

single family detached dwellings



Example of Minimal-Traditional House type with a moderate pitched side gable roof, Chelsea Circle

Style

Primarily Minimal Traditional and Ranch (including split level) but with some Arts and Crafts influenced, Cape Cod and Contemporary homes built more than 50 years ago (2008).

Material

Brick veneer exterior, clapboard, masonry accents around entrances and porches. Foundations primarily were built with granite on the Minimal Traditional and some of the earlier Ranch and Cape Cod homes with brick and sometimes cast concrete and concrete block becoming more prevalent in later-built homes.



Example of Ranch House type with a low-pitched hip roof, Chelsea Circle

Roof Form

Hip and side gable.

Roof Pitch

majority are low to moderate roof pitch, Low = less than 30 degrees (4/12 to 7/12) on most of the Ranch homes. Moderate = between 30 to 45 degrees (12/12) occurs on most of the Minimal-Traditional and other style homes.

Massing (three-dimensional form)

strong horizontal emphasis of main building block with both symmetrical and asymmetrical facades; small projecting wings and subordinate front gables on some houses.



Example of a 2-story home with a strong horizontal orientation or emphasis.

Directional Emphasis

The strong Horizontal emphasis of the Minimal traditional, Ranch, and other older homes is one of the most important defining characteristics of the homes within Chelsea Heights. Maintaining the Horizontal Emphasis will assure that Chelsea Heights maintains its original character in both the Minimal Traditional and the Ranch dominated areas of the subdivision.

Other

Details

Minimal building elements.

Roof material

Composition or asphalt shingle.

Garages and parking

Integral garages for Minimal Traditional homes, with both garages and carports for Ranches. Generally, both garages and carports are front loading with parking on side driveway or on rear pads where garages or carports are absent. Small scale detached garages set to the side or slightly behind homes occur; these garages are front loading and are accessed via a straight narrow drive from the road.

Porches

Small entrance stoops, are characteristic of the Minimal-Traditional homes while side porches, and distinct rear patios or terraces that contribute to the indoor/outdoor living style of the Ranch house are dominant.



Example of integral front-loading garage, Coventry Drive.



Example of small-scale detached garage to right of house, Dyson Drive.

Windows

Varied, including single and paired, double-hung, casement and horizontal sash. Wood and steel being typical of earlier homes with wood and aluminum introduced in the later Ranch homes.

Chimneys

Prominent front chimneys on some (mostly Ranch) houses.

Accessory buildings

Not a prominent site feature.

Retaining Walls

In many areas of Chelsea heights topographic relief is high. Because of this there are a number of retaining walls. The majority of these are only a few feet high following topography and are flush with the sidewalk. Detailing and accents are minimal. Walls typically are built with granite, cast concrete or concrete block and rarely brick.

Foundation Materials

Granite, brick, concrete block, and cast concrete are the only foundation materials that occur in the character area that were not introduced in the last ten years (since 2008).

Special Area Features

Historic Plat Patterns vs. Evolution of Established Neighborhood

The neighborhood was originally platted in 1914 with a majority of lots with a 50' street frontage. Building construction began during the mid-1920s into the 1930s. Homes built during this period typically followed the Minimal-Traditional style and in keeping with the FHA small homes movement were relatively small. Currently, (2008) 50' lots occur on Coventry Road and its "feeder" streets. The majority of the neighborhood homes were constructed from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s. During the period of building construction, two to three of the original 50' lots were combined to create the existing lots found in most of the neighborhood today. Lots in this portion of the neighborhood range in frontage from 75 to 150 feet. Homes built during this period varied and include those that were influenced by the Cape Cod and Bungalow styles however, the vast majority of homes built during this time and in these areas were 1 story and rarely split-level ranch homes. In addition, the landscape design associated with these homes emphasize an integration of the indoor and outdoor living spaces with terraces and patios becoming integral to "outdoor living". In Chelsea Heights this new relation to the landscape resulted in more intimate garden spaces near the home with, planting of many large trees away from the home to reinforce the horizontal and vertical planes that are an integral part of the architectural heritage of these homes.

Infill Development

Because of the increasing desirability of in-town housing, a current trend in the Chelsea Heights is to attempt to construct proportionally large homes on relatively small lots, thereby introducing additional structures to the neighborhood that often are at an increased scale and mass from the existing buildings such, that the rhythm of the street is disrupted. At issue is the compatibility of infill development with the existing character of the neighborhood.

Infill construction can be appropriate to the established visual character of the neighborhood by respecting established site, landscape and building characteristics.

In particular three elements must be considered when making decisions regarding construction within the subdivision. These are:

- The strong horizontal orientation or emphasis of most of the homes that were built in the area prior to the 1970s.
- The rhythm or the strong recurring pattern between the landscape and the home that exists. Put another way, the strong relation between the built environment and the landscape or void spaces between such is an integral part of the character of the area. In areas where the 50-foot platting pattern occurs this rhythm is such that the buildings dominate. The opposite is true in the areas where ranch homes occur and where the landscape or voids define the rhythm of the streetscape.
- The sense of place imparted by the canopy of trees that have grown since the inception of construction.

DESIGN OBJECTIVES:

Ensure compatibility of new construction and building additions by continuing the established patterns of building mass and scale, strong horizontal directional emphasis, roof form and pitch, and setback.

- Nurture the existing sense of place in the neighborhood while also accommodating compatible new construction and alterations.
- Promote development that maintains the scale, or perception of scale, of existing buildings as seen from the street.
- Facilitate additions to existing houses that minimize perceived building mass.
- Maintain the established and differing rhythms or pattern of solid to void (building to open space) in the neighborhood.
- Preserve significant tree canopy on individual lots.
- Encourage creative architectural designs that respect the basic development patterns of the neighborhood but do not dictate architectural models.

GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

These Guidelines and Recommendations are to be applied in the place of and intended to supersede the existing Guidelines of the Druid Hills Historic District, except as to Sections 5, 6, 8 & 9 of the General Guidelines, which shall fully apply to Chelsea Heights. Additionally, all of the General Guidelines are to apply to contributing homes in Chelsea Heights built on or before 1946, and these Guidelines are not to apply to such homes. It is the intent of these Guidelines and Recommendations to preserve the as-built historical pattern of development of Chelsea Heights without unduly restricting or regulating the architectural style and features of homes constructed or renovated in the District.

Setback

There are variety of setbacks that occur within Chelsea Heights. These are the result of the many styles of homes built over any number of years. Generally, though front setbacks are “deep” in relation to the length of the yard. This pattern should be maintained.



There are a variety of setbacks in the neighborhood; New construction front-yard setbacks should rarely exceed the plane of existing setbacks. Generally front yard setbacks are “deep” in relation to the length of the yard. The aerial photograph depicts the typical setback along Dyson Drive.

17.1 Recommendation — New construction front-yard setbacks should rarely exceed the plane of existing setbacks. In other words, the distance from the street should be about the same for new construction as adjacent existing homes

Horizontal Emphasis

Prior to the 1970s all of the homes in Chelsea Heights were constructed with a strong horizontal orientation or emphasis. In the early periods of construction this was a function of the FHA small house designs that were prevalent at the time, later introduction of the low and rambling Ranch style homes reinforced this emphasis and as such this is one of the definitive visual characters of the neighborhood and thus must be strongly considered when making design decisions.

17.2 Guideline — New construction and additions should preserve and reinforce the streetscape character of Chelsea Heights by maintaining the predominant horizontal building emphasis of the neighborhood. Primary building façades should create a horizontal emphasis versus a vertical emphasis.

Plate Height

Plate height is the height from the finished floor of a structure to the top of the exterior wall. By limiting the plate height, the perceived scale and the horizontal orientation of new construction is more readily attained. The use of tray or vaulted ceilings may be used to increase ceiling height while maintaining plate height.

17.3 Recommendation — New construction and additions should have perceived plate heights that are compatible with those of adjacent properties and homes along the street. Ensuring compatible plate heights can address, more specifically, the appropriate scale of new construction than addressing the number of stories alone.



Illustration of plate height— limiting plate height can help decrease the height and massing of new construction and increase the horizontal emphasis of such.

17.4 Recommendation — In keeping with the guidelines of scale, the perceived scale of new infill residences and additions should be minimized. New construction or additions generally should be consistent with the height of nearby structures. Typically, there should be no more than two floors as viewed from the primary street frontage to ensure compatibility with the predominant housing character of Chelsea Heights. This means that those lots that slope down and away from the fronting street can accommodate taller structures and still maintain the general character of the street. Lots that slope upward from the street will need special attention given to building height and rooflines to avoid a building that towers over the street and neighboring homes. Special attention will need to be paid to foundation heights and topography represented on drawings to ensure that foundations do not add to the visual perception of height.



Below left—recent construction (2007) that minimizes plate height has a strong horizontal emphasis, and appears to be 1 ½ stories. Roof pitch is atypically steep but in general house is in keeping with character of neighborhood.



Recent construction (2007) that minimizes plate height has a strong horizontal emphasis, and appears to be 1 ½ stories. The well-considered use of landscape grading and retaining walls to minimize the perceived scale of this new infill exemplifies the intent of the Chelsea Heights character area guidelines.

Roof pitch and form

Both the Minimal Traditional and the ranch exhibit relatively low roof pitches from 4/12 for ranches to 12/12 on some of the Minimal Traditional forms. While not universal these are typical and as such help to reinforce the horizontal emphasis typified by the bulk of the neighborhood homes. In addition, side-gable roofs typically are the norm on the Minimal-Traditional homes with subordinate front gable. The ranch is more typified by the hip roof form.

17.5 Guideline — Primary roof forms on new and renovated buildings should be side gable, or hip roofs. Front gable roofs are appropriate when they are greatly subordinate to the primary side-gabled or hipped roof.



Minimal-Traditional house with a side-gabled roof with subordinate front gable (right) compared to recently constructed (2007) Craftsman style side-gable roof with dominant front gable. While handsome the large front gable is not congruous with the homes in the area of influence.

17.6 Guideline — Roofs typically should feature a low (4/12) to moderate (12/12) pitch.



New construction (2008) completed with a low-pitched hipped roof form. Note how the roof form accentuates the horizontal orientation of the home.

Foundations and retaining walls

Because of relatively abrupt changes in topographic relief, the use of retaining walls has been an inherent part of Chelsea Heights neighborhood since its inception. However in attempting to minimize the overall height of new homes while maximizing plate, story and basement heights large earth cuts are being employed for new construction. This in turn causes construction of foundation heights and retaining walls that are out of scale with the neighborhood. In addition, new and incongruous foundation and wall materials (and application of such as a façade) on these monolithic structures add an obvious arrhythmic element to the typical streetscape.

17.7 Guideline — The height of foundations and retaining walls should be modest and congruous with the existing topography and homes in the area of influence. Special attention should be given to grading plans during design review to ensure that cuts are necessary and not excessive with contour grading being the norm.



Large retaining wall on new construction that is out of scale with the built environment of Chelsea Heights.

17.8 Guideline — Foundation and retaining wall materials should be limited to brick, concrete block, cast concrete and granite. Application of other materials as a façade should not be allowed if visible from the right of way.

Cast concrete retaining wall on new construction (right) Retaining wall is modest in scale and minimal in design, following topographic relief and is an example of good design practice for retaining wall in Chelsea Heights.



Tall foundation with non-historic materials applied as a façade interjects an arrhythmic element to the typical Chelsea Heights Streetscape.



Besides the previous guidelines and recommendations and as an aid to current and future residents there are additional recommendations and examples that could aid one in the design of homes that are compatible with the current homes in Chelsea Heights. Creative new designs that are compatible with the design traditions of the established neighborhood are encouraged, whether there is a new building or a new addition. While it is not the intent to require that new buildings copy older building styles, the use of established building forms and patterns is likely to ease the process of gaining approval. Accordingly, new second story additions to homes including ranch style houses are acceptable when they comply with these Guidelines.



Well-conceived addition that would substantially increase the size of the home while minimizing the appearance of the mass of the home. Breaking buildings into smaller architectural components avoids the perception of monumental façade.



Poorly conceived addition that would mask the homes original proportions and character.

17.9 Recommendation — Place an addition at the rear of a building or set back from the front to minimize the visual impact on the original structure to allow the original proportions and character to remain prominent and to differentiate the old from the new.



Well-conceived addition that would complement the homes original proportions and character.



An additional story or split-level addition on an existing ranch home could be in keeping with the horizontal orientation of the homes in Chelsea Heights (below left)



Well executed new construction (2008) in Chelsea Heights subdivision. Horizontal emphasis is maintained by judicious use of a hipped roof. Foundation is low (because of well-conceived contour grading) and granite. Multiple architectural elements and roof setbacks avoid a monumental façade. Architectural details are important but minimal.

Special note regarding materials

In general materials should be in keeping with those that are endemic to the neighborhood, namely, wood, granite, brick and asphalt. However newer materials may be introduced into the neighborhood if in keeping with the historical context of these older materials. For example, the use of cementitious siding that mimics the profile and texture of wood (commonly referred to as Hardiplank) may be consistent with some exterior applications. The introduction of some “green” materials for example solar shingling and panels may be appropriate and should be given special design consideration.



These two pictures illustrate the differences in streetscape rhythm between the areas where 50-foot lots are common and the areas where larger lots occur. On the left 50-foot frontages lead to homes dominating the rhythm of the streetscape while on larger lots the voids are the dominant element of rhythm. In both areas the tree canopy is important but much more so in the areas where ranch homes were built on combined lots. Note that in both areas the horizontal orientation, rhythm and tree canopy are the hallmarks of the Chelsea Heights subdivision. The significance of the extent of the lot and the specific character of the landscape is clear and the character of the property is largely dependent on an extensive and principally green canopied landscape

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 Scrivener's errors corrected and numbers added March 9, 2020