

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Historic Preservation Commission Orders Reversal of Unauthorized Alterations at Christiansted Property

The HPC directed property owner Trudy Fenster to restore bricked-in steps and blocked archways at her Church and Custom streets building, saying safety concerns should have been addressed through signage rather than permanent changes.

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Cinderblocks and concrete planter installed at 16AA Church Street, Christiansted without HPC authorization must be removed, commission says. By. SCREENSHOT FROM HPC MEETING.

The Historic Preservation Commission on Thursday ordered Trudy Fenster to reverse a series of unauthorized alterations made to her historic Christiansted property, concluding that safety concerns could have been addressed with signage rather than permanent changes that altered historic features and encroached on the public right of way.

The matter stems from renovations to the building at the corner of Church and Custom streets, where historic steps were bricked in and several archways were blocked with concrete planters and cinderblocks, some cemented in place. Fenster told committee members the changes were made in response to safety and liability concerns following reported falls near the property.

“When the person fell, not one, but two, and the issue came up, I really started reimagining what I could do to make it safe,” she said. None of the alterations, however, had been approved by the Historic Preservation Commission, prompting discussion Thursday about her regulatory non-compliance.

Committee chair Collette Woodson Burgess told Fenster the issue had generated numerous complaints. “I have gotten so many phone calls,” Burgess said. “You don’t really have the liberty of just removing a staircase from a historical building,” she continued, adding that the unapproved changes themselves created a risk for passersby.

Fenster, an attorney, acknowledged the lapse. “In retrospect, I could have come and asked...not could, should have come and asked the thoughts and the guidance of this committee,” she said.

Burgess noted that uneven historic steps are common in the area and that other businesses have addressed similar concerns with unintrusive warning signs rather than permanent alterations. Sean Krigger, director of the State Historic Preservation Office, told committee members that the violations were more extensive than initially presented. “It’s my understanding from input from staff that it not only includes the staircase that was in the photographs, but there were also historic steps on the Church Street side that were also filled in. Those have to be restored,” he said.

Fenster’s initial denials of responsibility were countered by photographs presented by Krigger. HPC member Kurt Marsh added that the issue extended beyond commission oversight. “Particularly in Christiansted, the arcades are a part of the public right of way....This actually goes beyond HPC violation,” he said.

Responding to Fenster’s reiterated liability concerns, Marsh suggested that potential trip hazards could be addressed by placing planters that were “not fixed and permanent,” and by repairing the affected steps. Fenster replied that she would welcome assistance but was uncertain it would materialize. “If DPW will come and make the stair safe, I would be happy to get the assistance...but I don’t know that that will ever happen,” she said.

Despite her concerns, Fenster agreed to comply with the commission’s directive to reverse the unauthorized permanent changes. “I just want to get this finished safely and within the guidelines,” she said.