

Sunset Forest Association
Architectural Review and Building Handbook

Section V - Helpful Hints for Building and Living on Mackinac Island

When planning a home construction or improvement project on Mackinac Island, you may want to take into consideration a few architectural and construction recommendations:

1. The “City” has specific building ordinances relating to maximum allowable elevation heights of the structure, rooflines, turrets, etc. along with maximum percentage of property coverage that the main dwelling may occupy. It is important to obtain this information along with similar ordinances that affect the overall architectural design of your dwelling or improvement.
2. Storage space is in very short supply on Mackinac Island. Keep in mind where you are going to store all the toys – bikes, bikes and more bikes, snowmobile(s), porch and lawn furniture, barbeque, water toys...the list goes on. A detached storage building is only allowed in the Woodbluff development. In the Stonecliffe Manors, your storage facility must be integral to the main house design.
3. If you decide to have an integral designed carriage house / garage to your home, you may want to consider a side entry or rear entry design. Depending upon your home design, this will make the front elevation of the home look as if it has more livable space along with keeping to a Victorian and Turn-of-the-Century period. Also, many custom door manufactures are out there offering period design wood-insulated sectional roll-up doors.
4. If the topography of your property and house permits, you may want to consider incorporating a storage area beneath an elevated porch area and/or access door(s) to your crawlspace / basement.
5. If you’re not interested in a full depth basement, consider a crawl space of a minimum seven blocks high – 4 below ground level, 3 above. It’s easy enough to get around in and still provide additional storage space. Also, a foundation that sits a bit out of the ground (at least three block high) is very desirable – from the standpoint of rain and snow. It also gives the house the “lift” that most Victorian and Turn-of-the-Century designed homes are known for.
6. There is never enough interior dry storage space. If you have workable attic space, design in a plywood floor and a pull-down attic staircase in the hallway or in a large bedroom closet.
7. When you go down into the crawlspace / basement / under porch storage and up into the attic – it’s nice to see where you are going - consider lights throughout.
8. If you have a crawl space with a dirt (sand & gravel) floor – a ground vapor barrier is a must. Heavy gauge plastic sheeting does the trick.

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9. Consider providing an access door and staircase to your crawl space or full basement inside the carriage house / garage – open it up and walk right downstairs. If that doesn't work, consider exterior mounted outside cellar style access doors.
10. It can get really cold during the winter months on Mackinac Island. Consider foam insulating the walls of your crawlspace / basement. Insulate all the plumbing in your crawlspace / basement. Insulate your hot water tank. Vents and windows should be closed and insulated during the winter season. Design your plumbing for easy winterization and draining (start-up and shut-down for seasonal properties). Have the water meter and its shutoffs located in the crawlspace / basement and within easy access, if possible. That way, if the main line freezes and breaks before the meter and its shutoffs – you don't flood the entire first floor of the house. Have a crawlspace / basement floor drain for easy draining of your hot water tank.
11. Did we mention that it snows a lot (with ice build-up) during the winter on Mackinac Island? And – oh by the way, when it rains – it pours. Something to do with the fact that a big lake surrounds us. You may want to consider these issues in your roof and porch designs and construction.
12. One of the most beautiful features of the Victorian and Turn-of-the-Century home is its porches. They are meant to be sat on, to entertain on and to waste the day away on. Front, rear, side, covered, enclosed, screened - you may want to give them the special attention they deserve. They are the true welcome mats to your home and the world around you.
13. Consider putting your porch lighting on a dimmer controlled on/off switch. It may give you just the right amount of accent lighting you desire.
14. Regarding additional accent and security lighting, consider mounting recessed lighting at various locations around the house in the overhangs of the house and porch roofs. Besides being on a dimmer controlled on/off switch, you may also want to consider having these lights wired to a photoelectric sensor circuit so that they turn on automatically at night.
15. Not all wood siding, shingling and trim are the same. Wood should be cedar and/or redwood. Both are known for their superior insect and rot resistance. The higher the grade of wood, the fewer knots, blemishes and poor grain detail. Also, all wood siding has two sides – smooth and rough grain. Decide what look you desire.
16. A good contractor knows that on a wood exterior finished home, it is important to prime both sides of all cedar and/or redwood siding and trim board before nailing into place. Moisture may push the natural resins of the wood from the backside through the painted

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exterior side of the wood, thus showing resin stain spots. Priming all sides prevents this from happening and further protects and seals the finished work.

17. Though your porch and stair framing may be constructed of pressure treated wood, consider cladding that framing with cedar or redwood trim board. Also, use a finish grade cedar or redwood for your porch decking, spindles, railings and stairs. Besides superior appearance, cedar or redwood will hold a latex based paint or stain – pressure treated wood may not.
18. Just like the ornate hats that the ladies of the late 19th and early 20th century wore, the roof(s) on a Victorian “Painted Lady” is of extreme importance. It needs to fit properly, be well balance, and be attractive. It needs to draw attention to us admirers.
19. Victorian and Turn-of-the-Century homes did not have modern sheet metal roof vents mounted everywhere on the roof. You may want to consider roof overhangs with continuous vent strips along with peak style ornate shutter vents into your design. Well-ventilated attic spaces are a must in the northern climate.
20. If possible, don’t draw attention to rooftop plumbing vents on the front elevation of the home.
21. If you desire or require a cedar shake roof, what lies under the final shingling is key to the lasting beauty and longevity of the roof – felt and breather material layers laid throughout, rubber membrane material (at roof edge, peaks, valleys and potential trouble areas), aluminum or copper flashing in the valleys and where required. Consider installing zinc roof strips to prevent any “greening” of the roof due to damp shaded areas.
22. Victorian and Turn-of-the-Century homes are often referred to as “Painted Ladies”. They are meant to be an expression of colors. Painted Ladies had three, four, five, six or more corresponding colors applied to their exteriors. Many of these colors and combinations of are historically and period defined. Most paint and stain manufacturers have color palettes showing historical home colors and combinations. The colors of your Victorian home are the finishing touch. You may want to paint a sample area, first, before painting the entire house. You’ll want to get this one right.
23. You built this beautiful Victorian home on Mackinac Island, but you have to mount a few unsightly modern things on the exterior of the house – electric meter, phone / cable / water meter boxes and the grinder tank motor starter control box. If you are to be hooked up to the force demand sewer system of the Development(s) – you will have a grinder tank in the front yard along with this control box mounted on the outside of the house. For all these items, it’s necessary to have easy access to them, but you may not necessarily want them to be the focal point on the front elevation of your beautiful home.

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24. Considered pre-wiring your home during construction for: Telephone, Cable TV, Attic mounted TV Antenna, Internet, Intercom, etc. It's much easier when the home is still in the roughed-in stage.

22. Except for the trees you remove from your property during excavation, wood for home fireplaces is not readily available on the Island. State Park trees are a No-No. Unless cleared and obtained from another private property owner; you will have to have your wood transported by boat and dray. Storage is yet another problem. You may want to consider a propane gas or wood pellet burning freestanding cast iron stove or fireplace insert when designing your home. Propane tanks are available on the Island through the Mackinac Island Service Company –100lb and 200lb tanks.

Now for some things to be considered due to the uniqueness of building and living on Mackinac Island:

1. Everything has to come here by boat. When the lake freezes and the boats stop running, nothing comes to the Island – except people and small items by airplane. Get to know the ferry transport companies, the Mackinac Island Service Company (dray transport service), and the Great Lakes Air, Inc. folks (air charter service from St. Ignace). You need them on your team very early in and throughout the game. Getting things to, from and around Mackinac Island is a delicate balancing act. They are very good at it.

2. Take special consideration in scheduling, staging and packaging your project material to the Island and work sight. Try to eliminate multiple handling of materials. Improperly done, it will cost you time and money. Also, remember, you can't hop into the car and run off to Home Depot at will. Discuss with the ferry companies about the storage and staging of your construction material both in St. Ignace and on the Island.

3. You are on an Island where horses rule. If a horse and dray can do the job – they must be used. Period! Special vehicles permits may be applied for with the City when horses can't do the job – such as excavation and really heavy load hauling. Special permits can only be applied for in the off tourist season (October). Get in line early.

4. During your construction project, consider staging a dray at the property site for the construction waste. This will keep the job site orderly and make clean up easier than having to handle all the waste twice. Contact the Mackinac Island Service Company to arrange for a dray. A special tag is required when the dray is full before it will be removed and replaced with an empty, if required.

5. This is a tourist destination. The tourist season has an effect on any project. Very little visible construction is allowed during the summer months. Special permits may be required.

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6. Not all contractors and builders are created equal when it comes to Mackinac Island. As unique as the Island itself, building a home here is truly an experience. With the right team, it will seem uniquely easy – the wrong one, uniquely bad. The most important favor you can do yourself is to hire a team that has demonstrated experience in doing work on the Island. You will save yourself a lot of money and grief.
7. If the contractor works a 40-hour week or more, have him do it in 10+plus hour days. A lot of work time is lost with daily boat, plane and bike travel time - not to mention start-up and clean-up time required each working day.
8. When the excavation of your home foundation begins, don't be surprised what the contractor may dig up. Mackinac Island is all limestone and rock with a little sand and gravel thrown in. What comes out of the hole does not necessarily go back in. The contractor may also have to blast on some rare occasions. Make sure he has a way and place to haul the rough debris away. You don't want the "big stuff" jammed back into the hole against your foundation walls.
9. Don't forget about the Cloverland Electric guys. Without electricity at the job site, you can't get started. Get to them and get scheduled in early.
10. Fill dirt is not available on the Island unless somebody else has dug a hole in the ground and is trying to get rid of its contents. If you need fill, try to find out who that somebody is. If he doesn't exist, you will have to have a truck(s) full ship to the Island.
11. The Island makes and sells great compost dirt at its DPW solid waste facility for top-dressing your lawn, gardens and flowerbeds. Get lined up for some early in the spring season.
12. Tip – If you need fill dirt, top soil, stone, sand, landscaping material, etc. – and its not available or to costly on the Island – make arrangements with a contractor doing work on the Island. They prefer shipping their trucks to the Island with the beds full.
13. The City DPW charges a sizable sewer system tap in fee. Contact the "City" Department of Public Works for additional information and cost.
14. Mackinac Island does not have a landfill. All garbage and construction debris is sorted at the Island DPW solid waste facility for compost, recyclables and landfill. All landfill material is shipped off the Island and disposed of. Carting half filled drays with construction debris to the waste facility can be expensive. Contact the Mackinac Island Service Company (dray service) and the "City" DPW solid waste facility for information, suggestions and costs.

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15. Trash pickup and recycling occurs on Mackinac Island weekly or every other week, depending on the season, via horse-drawn dray. Specially designated bags are required for each and are available for a minimal cost from the “City” DPW.

16. Be prepared, be patient and enjoy the adventure. Remember – Mackinac Island and its People are unique. All – Locals, Cottagers, Business People, Contractors and Visitors – that are drawn to and love this place feel they have a strong interest in what happens here. They are also advocates for maintaining the historical, natural and emotional ambience and uniqueness of this place. All will be interested in your project and will look forward to a job well done.