

Proposal for 111 W. Brown Street

Milwaukee, WI, 53212

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Abstract

Motion to permit a new construction on 111 W Brown St, part of the Historic Brewers Hill Association using high end Fiberglass Windows and Fiber Cement Siding as a wood substitute. Modern materials deliver the aesthetic and quality of antique materials at lower costs, and for an identical service life without compromise on architectural details relevant to a preservation committee. It is further necessary to abandon excessive restrictions on structures with less historical significance altogether due to current market and ecological conditions at risk of Historic Preservation becoming a sport for the wealthy.

Review and Support

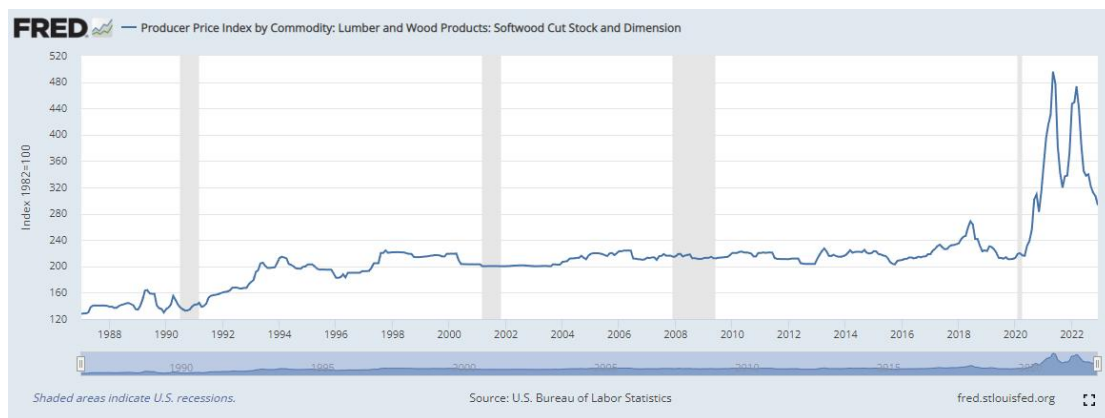
District 6 Alderwoman, Milele A. Coggs

Quality of Wood

Economically and Ecologically, yesterday's forests and today's forest are not comparable. Old growth lumber long undisturbed is now rotated every 80-120 years, not long enough to develop the same working properties of antique cedar that we ascribe the durability to^[1].

Furthermore, the heavy subsidization of timber from Canada which gave us a spoiled position for high quality goods is no longer present. U.S. tariffs on Canadian imports have driven up pricing and forced a reliance on comparably poorer managed forest inventories domestically^[2].

Compounding both difficulties are the effects that climate change has brought upon less hardy forests. Since 2017, substantial die-back has threatened inventories and the lack of old large volume trees^[3] has tightened supply on logs for high quality lumber products (Clear & Clear Hearts) further driving up pricing on siding products.



[Above] Softwood prices over time (aggregate of all grades and species)^[4]



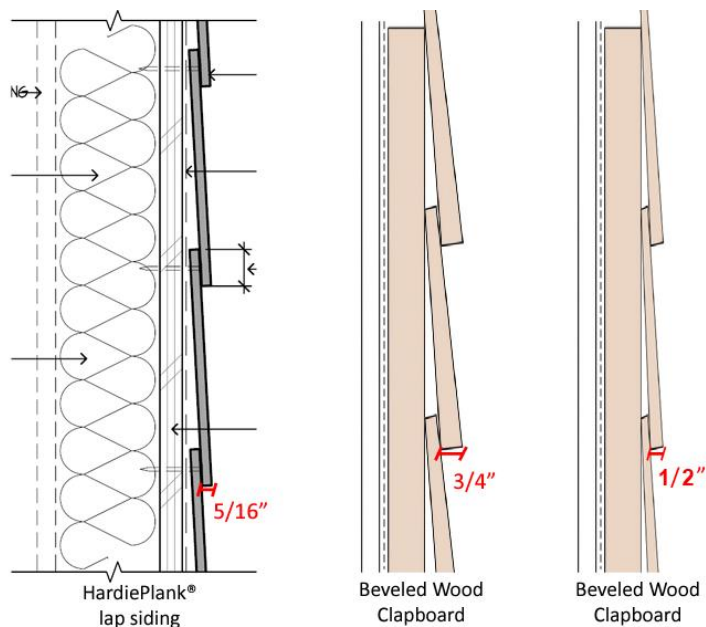
[Above] Siding, shingle and wood tie prices over time (aggregate of all grades and species)

It is important to clarify in the prior graphs that this does not account for grade or species, yet their inclusion and reliance is the primary factor driving a long term price growth on siding versus the short spike in framing commodity that we are all a bit more efficacious of due to the disproportionate increase of high value cedar products. For example in 2019 the price of a bundle of #1 machine cut sidewall shingles was approximately \$50, and today range about \$300. To compensate for the scarcity of high grade wood and high prices, FJP products are now a standard along with STK and other lower quality grades as substitutes.

Aesthetics of Siding

In 2017, the City of Chicago's department of Planning, Design & Historic Preservation Division conducted a study and published an article on the use of fiber cement siding for historic properties, specifically in regards to the appropriateness of its use against the historic clapboard that many of the local properties possess. It is critical to recognize that they supported the use of smooth fiber cement thus forward on ALL new construction projects^[5], and in numerous other existing/replacement scenarios. In reviewing their case, the same reason's they came to this conclusion, only apply more to our context of the local properties of brewer's hill and the surrounding area.

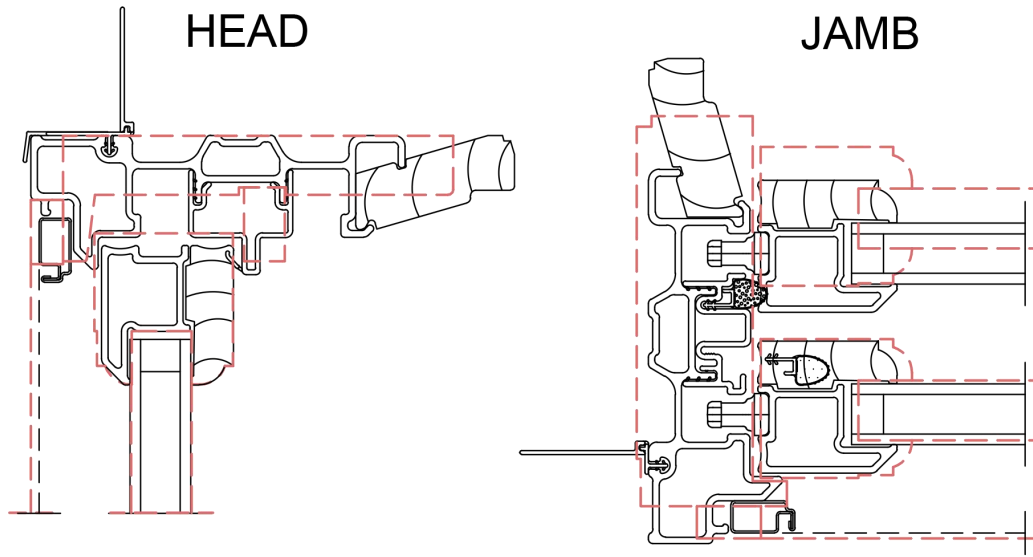
In this study and several other disputes across the country over fiber cement, the thickness of the material plays a key role. Matching thickness and exposure are a key detail of recreating the look of historic wood siding - a detail made easier by the fact that a large portion of Milwaukee housing stock was made with 1/2x4" or 6" bevel siding, and not the 3/4" stock that is common elsewhere. On the block of the proposed project out of nine houses, one has 6" Fiber cement, two have 12" hardboard siding, one 4" wood lap, and the remaining five 6" wood lap. Given this, it is appropriate to use 6" fiber cement lap to fit in with the surrounding context and develop historic character on the block.



Aesthetically, the painted surface of wood siding against painted smooth fiber cement is simply indistinguishable. The only difference in the aesthetic is that fiber cement keeps its pristine look over it's lifespan rather than the decay, checking and splitting that wood exhibits over it's lifespan. Fiber cement simply keeps the look of excruciatingly maintained wood at lower cost and with less maintenance.

Aesthetics of Windows

Below, one can see the details of a typically approved window, the Marvin Ultimate Wood Double Hung, and overlaid the Marvin Elevate window^[6]. The sash proportions and depth of frame to sashes all create the classical proportion of an older wood window, unlike cheaper vinyl alternatives which possess shallow and skinny proportions and do not speak in a similar manner to the craftsmanship which created the windows of yesterday.



Marvin Ultimate Wood Outline [Simplified] - - - - -
Marvin Elevate Section Profile [Exact] —————

Let's review points laid out by the Wisconsin Historical Society on the replacement of windows:

"Properly repaired historic windows with storm windows have an R-factor similar to most new windows"

Yet fiberglass unit's do not require a storm window, and a storm window does not improve curbside aesthetic, it hampers it. It renders the depth of a beautiful old window to a flat plane with the siding, and creates a smaller daylight opening. A fiberglass clad wood window can show it's proportions all year long, and eliminate the maintenance of putting up, and servicing said storm sashes.

"Historic wood windows have life expectancies of 60 to 100 years, while warranties for most new vinyl and aluminum windows only guarantee them for eight to ten years"

A point which hinges on the quality of first and second growth lumber, which is not available on a new wood window regardless - a point the society themselves point out! Furthermore, there is no difference on warranty between an approved window, the Marvin Ultimate Wood and the proposed Marvin Elevate. Fiberglass, unlike the comparisons they make with vinyl is stable, durable, and lacks the maintenance needed by old wood windows.

Conclusion

In order for the act of preservation to be accessible, alternatives must now be considered due to financial, ecological and the working qualities of today's lumber. This applies to not only the key areas we address, but to others as well. Siding and Windows represent the greatest portion of expense for curb appeal, and by granting alternatives allow greater involvement in the preservation of old homes through affordable high quality materials, true to the nature of classic builders and true to a desperate need for affordable housing in the county of Milwaukee.

Sources

- [1.] Rep. *Western Redcedar – Issues for Managing for Desirable Characteristics under Retention of Varying Levels*. 1.1 ed. Victoria, B.C. , Canada: Symmetree Consulting Group Ltd, 2008.
- [2.] Rep. *Softwood Lumber Imports from Canada: Current Issues*. 28th ed. Congressional Research Service, 2018.
- [3.] Western Redcedar Dieback. Washington State University. Accessed February 9, 2023. <https://ppo.puyallup.wsu.edu/plant-health-concerns/redcedar/>.
- [4.] “Producer Price Index by Commodity: Lumber and Wood Products: Softwood Cut Stock and Dimension.” FRED. St. Louis FED, January 18, 2023. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WPU08110503>.
- [5.] Planning, Design & Historic Preservation Division, Fiber Cement Siding Policy § (2017).
- [6.] “[Ultimate Wood/Elevate] Double Hung Operating Detail.” Warroad, Minnesota: Marvin Windows, 2022.
- [7.] “Advantages of Maintaining Your Historic Windows.” Advantages of Maintaining Your Historic Windows. Wisconsin Historical Society, August 8, 2014. <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4302>.