What is a Context Area?

As defined in the 2015 historic preservation ordinance, a context area is “the blockface and the opposing blockface within the district where the proposed activity is located. Context area may include a different geographic area if the commission finds that unusual and compelling circumstances exist or that the context area is described different in design guidelines.”

This image (left) shows how a context area would be defined in practice. The star represents a proposed project or activity in a historic district. The white line surrounds the context area, as defined in the ordinance.

*Blocks* are one or more lots, tracts, or parcels of land bounded by streets, easements, rights-of-way, or other physical features (or a combination of these).

The *blockface* where this example is located would be the west side of Rutland, between 14th and 15th Streets. A blockface consists of the portion of the block that abuts the street; in this case, that’s the side of the street on which the project is located. The opposite side of the street is called the *opposing blockface*.

Blockfaces do not continue past the end of the block.

How are Context Areas used in the City of Houston historic preservation ordinance, as amended in 2015?

The 2015 historic preservation ordinance refers to *the context area* in a number of places involving Certificates of Appropriateness (COA). A property owner who wants to alter the exterior of a building in a historic district, build an addition, build new construction, relocate a building, or demolish a building, must apply for and receive a COA before doing that work. The COA process enables the City to protect and maintain the historic character of historic districts. When reviewing an application for a COA, the Planning staff and Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission will consider whether the proposed project is compatible with existing buildings *in the context area.*