



VIRGINIA
MAIN
Street

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT
OF HOUSING AND
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Design Guide
2025





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1. Introduction

The Main Street Approach to downtown revitalization was created by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the 1980s with the goal of economic revitalization in the context of historic preservation. To do this, they created an all encompassing four-point approach: Organization, Promotion, Economic Restructuring, and Design.

The purpose of this Guide is to be a resource and reference for the Virginia Main Street community organizations' directors, boards, and design committee members as they assess their downtowns, create a design vision for downtown, and annually update goals and work plans for design in their historic downtowns.

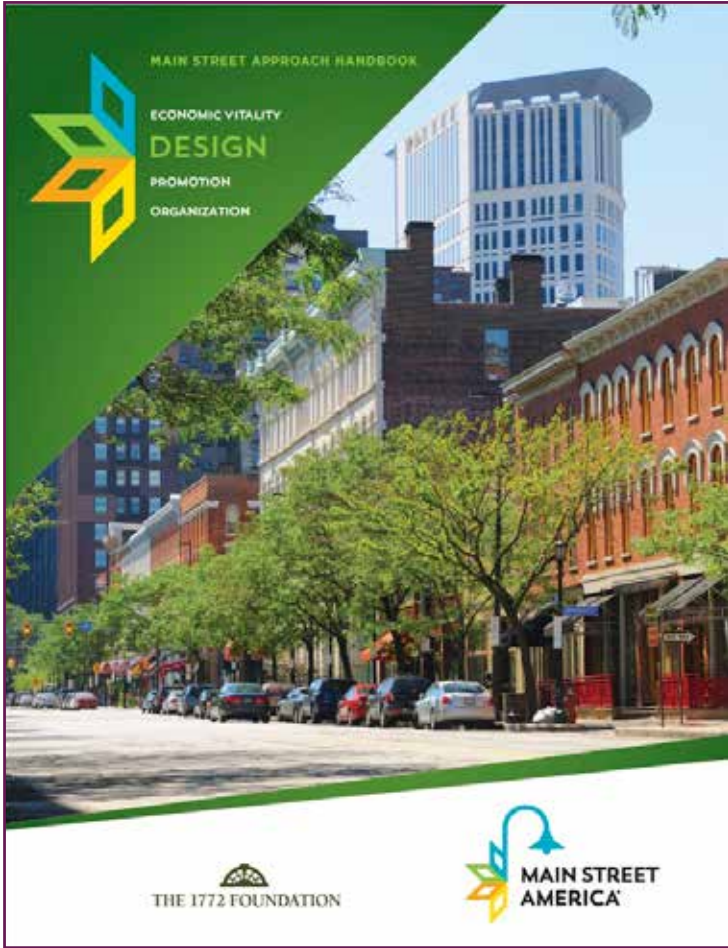
Another significant resource for Main Street communities is:

- The Main Street Approach Handbook - Design by Main Street America <https://mainstreet.org/resources/knowledge-hub/publication/design-handbook>

This design guide outlines information about the typical character of buildings and public spaces in Virginia's historic downtowns. It also gives guidance on design approaches to rehabilitating building facades and public areas as well as typical guidelines for new construction in historic downtown areas. If a community has an overlay local historic district with design guidelines then those guidelines take precedence over these guidelines. That said, the guidelines are likely very similar and there is other information included in this guide that may not be a part of the local guidelines.



Diagram of the four point Main Street approach.



2. Understanding Downtown Design

A. HOW COMMUNITIES - AND DOWNTOWNS - EVOLVED

Communities came into being for a variety of reasons. Trade and government were two key reasons for development.

- Communities developed around central areas for processing grain and transporting products.
- As communities developed, especially in Virginia, counties formed and county seats were established bringing courthouses and other offices needed to support growing areas.
- Transportation evolved from trails to roads to railroads, furthering centralizing delivery and pick up of goods.
- As communities became a hub for trade and government, larger businesses and factories located in many downtowns.
- As travel expanded with the railroad, the need for hotels grew and many downtowns have hotels from those periods.
- Other small businesses developed and grew to support a growing population.
- Institutions expanded from eastern Virginia to western Virginia.
- Entertainment venues such as theaters became an essential part of community life and were located in downtowns.

As the automobile grew in importance, downtowns began to decline as the hub for trade in order to accommodate trucks and delivery. Some downtowns suffered significant demolition to accommodate more vehicular traffic.

Today, from a design perspective, it is important to understand what remains in the downtown from early days, how the streets were laid out, and how residential neighborhoods connected by streets and sidewalks to downtown where all of commerce took place prior to the rise of the automobile and strip development.

For the most part, our downtowns are made up of one to three story commercial buildings built right next to the sidewalk for walkable access. First floors are commercial with storefronts and upper floors were, and remain today, used for a variety of uses from office to residential. Sometimes upper floors were simply storage for the businesses on the first floor as delivery of goods happened seasonally at best.

In addition to the commercial buildings, other building types including banks, county courthouses, office buildings, train stations, theaters, factory buildings, and warehouse, were located in our downtowns creating a rich architectural and cultural fabric.



Historic photograph of downtown Marion, Virginia showing variety of architectural styles and streetscape c. 1930s.

2. Understanding Downtown Design

B. DOWNTOWN DESIGN CHARACTER AND GUIDING DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Virginia's downtowns have the following general design character:

- Historic downtowns developed over time and have a rich variety of architectural styles, periods, and materials;
- Each downtown is unique and authentic and good design respects the style and time of a building or place;
- Each downtown has a distinct set of assets - physical, cultural, historical, natural;
- Quality matters - historic buildings were built with good materials by good builders - the craft is unique in every downtown and every building;
- Historic downtowns are walkable and human scale because they were designed before cars dominated the experience.



Historic photograph of downtown Warrenton, Virginia showing a variety of building types.

The following guiding design principles, gathered from a variety of resources, apply to all our historic downtowns:

- Retain, preserve, and maintain the historic character of the downtown district including the individual buildings and character defining public spaces;
- Prioritize rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings that retains the historic character, spaces, details, and features;
- Support and promote public improvements that retain/restore the historic character of the district;
- When renovating historic downtown buildings, original and early character and materials are retained in order to be true to the style and time of the building;
- By retaining and preserving an existing historic building, energy is saved, and the act is green and sustainable by its very nature;
- When planning any new building or streetscape improvements, the design should be compatible with and complement the historic context but not create false historicism;
- Maintenance is an important aspect of downtown design whether existing buildings, private sites, or public streetscape areas.



Historic photograph of a bustling downtown Bristol, Virginia and Tennessee

2. Understanding Downtown Design

C. RESOURCES ON COMMUNITY HISTORY

It is important to understand the unique history and sense of place of your downtown. This understanding helps to inform appropriate design steps when planning for downtown improvements. Some resources that help with this understanding are listed below.

1. Historic Designations

- **National Register of Historic Places Nominations:** Most Virginia Main Street communities are listed on the National Register making properties eligible for historic tax credits. The nomination typically has a description of the district, its history, and a listing of each building in the district by address. More recent nominations will also note each building as either being contributing or noncontributing to the district. This is useful if a property owner is considering historic tax credits. The nomination is a valuable resource for understanding the history and buildings in the downtown area. Visit the Virginia Department of Historic Resources website and search for your community to download the National Register nomination. <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/programs/historic-registers/>
- **Local Historic District:** Many communities have adopted a local historic preservation ordinance as allowed by Virginia law. The local district often has the same boundaries as the National Register district and there is a local architectural review board that reviews any exterior changes to a building in the district. Communities may also have local design guidelines for the district. Check with the local planning department to learn more about your local historic district, if there is one, and the process and guidelines for design review.

2. Other Historic Documents

- **Historic Properties Inventory:** Some communities have survey documents created when an inventory was made of properties in preparation for the National Register nomination. Check with local historical society or town planning to determine if this additional information is available
- **Local Historical Societies, Library Resources:** Again, check with these two resources to learn about information on the history of the downtown and historic district.
- **Historic Photographs and Newspaper Archives:** Finding historic photographs of the downtown is one of the most valuable resources when planning downtown improvements. Local libraries and historical societies may often have these resources. In addition, The Library of Virginia has a rich archive that is accessible online. Go to <https://www.lva.virginia.gov/>. Enter community name in "Search". On the next page go to "For Researchers" and select "Search LVA Catalog". Enter community name again in search box, and then select "Digital Collections". This will take you to their digital archive of photographs and other documents that have been scanned and added to their collection.
- **Plans or Drawings of Original Construction:** In rare circumstances, there may be drawings available of early buildings. Again, local historical societies, preservation organizations, or even local architectural firms may have these documents.

2. Understanding Downtown Design

D. THE SECRETARY OF INTERIOR'S STANDARDS FOR REHABILITATION

All of Virginia's Main Street communities have their historic downtowns listed on the National Register of Historic Places making contributing properties eligible for historic rehabilitation tax credits. The rehabilitation of a historic building needs to meet The Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and have the design and construction approved at both the state and federal level in order to be eligible for historic tax credits.

Some communities also have local historic districts with architectural review boards or historic preservation commissions that review any changes to the exterior of buildings in the district. These boards or commissions also have design guidelines that need to be followed. Typically, these guidelines are based on the Secretary's Standards.

Design services provided by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development also follow these standards. It is, therefore, important to understand the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

The Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation:

1. A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.
2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.
3. Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.

4. Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.
5. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a historic property shall be preserved.
6. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.
7. Chemical or physical treatments, such as sandblasting, that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.
8. Significant archaeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.
10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Also see: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/treatment-standards-rehabilitation.htm>

2. Understanding Downtown Design

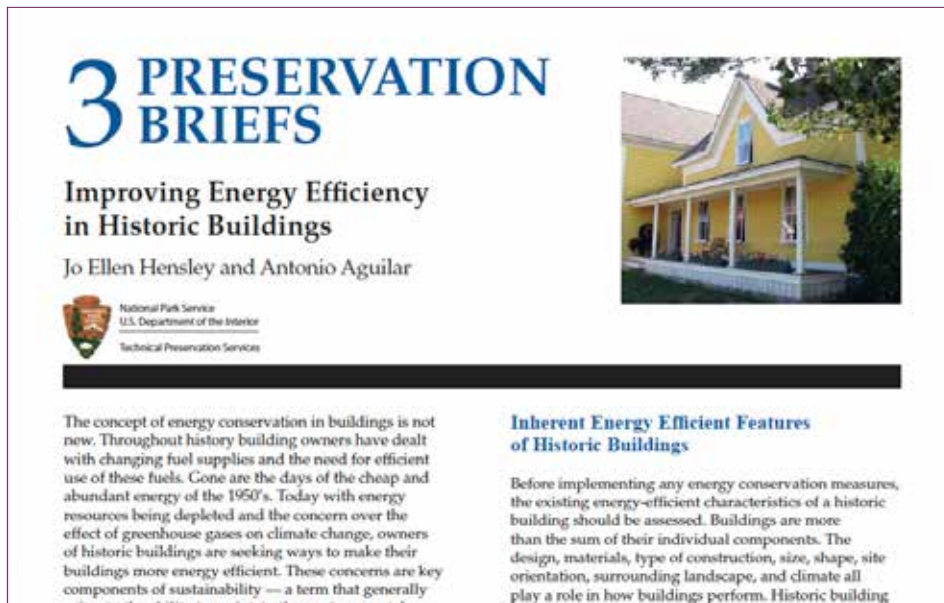
E. DESIGN AND PRESERVATION RESOURCES FOR HISTORIC PROPERTIES

The National Park Service Preservation Briefs address a wide variety of issues for maintaining, preserving, and rehabilitating historic buildings ranging from window repair, rehabbing historic storefronts, roof repair, and interior rehabilitation. There are over 50 briefs for download on their website.

- <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>

In addition, there are 50 Preservation Tech notes that address similar issues in more detail. See:

- <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-tech-notes.htm>
- <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/secretary-standards-treatment-historic-properties.htm>



Sample Preservation Brief

F. HISTORIC TAX CREDITS

Rehabilitation tax credits were created at the federal level in the 1970s and at the Virginia state level in 1997. The credits have been a significant incentive for downtown redevelopment over the years creating refreshed mixed-use commercial historic buildings in Virginia's downtowns. In short, the Federal program provides a 25% tax credit on the amount of rehabilitation for a project and the state provides a 20% credit. Spending thresholds are different for the two credits but for larger projects, this is usually not an issue.

For both credits there is a three-part application process that should be initiated at the start of the project before any construction work begins. The Virginia Department of Historic Resources website (link below) has a clear outline of the process. Their list of *Frequently Asked Questions* addresses important questions such as how much do you have to spend, phasing a project, and what work qualifies for credits.

For more information on the historic tax credits and how to use them, see the following websites:

- Federal Credits <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/taxincentives/index.htm>
- Virginia Historic Tax Credits. <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/programs/tax-credits/>

3. Know Your District

At the start of the effective design improvements for historic downtowns is having a clear understanding of the players, trending economics in the greater community, governing regulations, local history and more. This is a brief description to lay out an outline for communities to ensure that there is a clear understanding before embarking on design improvements.

A. THE PLAYERS

There are many players both in the public and private sector that have interest in and impact on historic downtowns.

■ Property owners

Downtown is generally a rich blend of all types of property owners. Ownership can range from in-town owners who occupy the building or have owned it for generations but do not occupy the building. Other properties may have out of town owners with local businesses renting spaces. Some downtown properties that are owned for generations may be managed by a trust. In any event, it is important to understand ownership to better understand the likelihood of having a building renovated.

Encouraging design services for owner-occupied buildings, where the owner can see the advantage of fixing up his/her building as a positive impact on their business, is a good place to start. Overall, it is important to find ways to ensure that all property owners are engaged in the downtown revitalization process and are aware of the benefits of VMS services.

■ Businesses

Many times, businesses lease spaces and do not own the building. In these cases, the value of a storefront improvement is readily apparent for the business, and if the rest of the building needs improvements and maintenance, that business owner can be an advocate and connection to the owner. Having the exterior of a building on all levels and all elevations in good condition and attractive, both front and rear, is essential to a positive vibe for downtown.

■ Local government and boards

It is essential to have regular communication with members of city/town councils, town managers, planning and economic development staff, and historic commission members to ensure that downtown revitalization is a city/town priority. Newsletters, meetings, and participation on committees helps to keep those key players connected and communications up to date.

■ Local organizations with an interest in downtown

There may be other local organizations such as historical societies and citizen or business organizations that would be supportive of downtown revitalization activities. Keeping them up to date and engaged with activities in the downtown helps build broader citizen support.

B. GOVERNING REGULATIONS

■ Local Zoning District

All communities have zoning that allows certain uses in designated areas. Typically, downtowns have B-Business category that describes allowed uses, area regulations, height regulations, parking, etc.

■ Historic Districts -Local District and Guidelines

Some communities have local historic districts with architectural review boards (ARB). The purpose of these local districts is to preserve and protect historic resources and any exterior work is reviewed and approved by the ARB. Review boards follow Standards established by the National Park Service and usually have design guidelines customized to the community. Typically these districts coincide with the National Register historic district boundaries.

■ Downtown Business District

Some downtowns have designated business districts that allow an extra real estate tax that supports the downtown district organization and/or improvements.

4. Steps for Making Improvements

Making design improvements in the downtown involves the following steps:

- A. Set goals for downtown improvements;
- B. Inventory and assess the physical character that makes your downtown unique;
- C. Identify Problems and Opportunities;
- D. Formulate and Implement a Plan of Action for Good Design Solutions.

Ultimately, set your big picture goals and “Begin with the end in mind.” Sample Goal: *Reintegrate the downtown into the community and recreate it as a fresh and exciting place to live, do business and play!*



Goals can include streetscape improvements with appropriately scaled lighting and pedestrian amenities.

A. SET GOALS FOR DOWNTOWN DESIGN IMPROVEMENTS

The typical goals, outlined below, can be tailored to meet the needs of a community by working with the design committee and local public staff and leaders. They should always be present as design improvements are being planned.

- Reintegrate the downtown into the community.
- Recreate downtown as an inviting place to do business.
- Provide clear direction to downtown and to parking.
- Provide well laid out parking with good pedestrian connections to destinations.
- Renovate existing buildings so they are attractive and inviting to business and customers and are fully utilized.
- Provide attractive and appropriate landscaping in the downtown.
- Provide appropriate pedestrian and general lighting.
- Relocate utility wires when feasible to improve views and vistas.
- Enhance available open space for events.
- Designate appropriate sites for new development and encourage appropriate design.
- Plan streetscape and public improvements that are attractive, appropriate to the community, provide a safe environment, and avoid over-design.
- Select elements such as trash receptacles, benches, and lights that are appropriate to the community.
- Follow established guidelines for renovating historic buildings which are The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation.
- Follow established guidelines for appropriate design such as those issued by the National Main Street Center.

4. Steps for Making Improvements

B. INVENTORY AND ASSESS THE PHYSICAL CHARACTER

In general, begin by reviewing any recent downtown design plans for improvements, either planned or implemented, to get a clear idea of the community's direction. Understand recent private property improvements as well. Gather any historic materials such as National Register nominations, historic photographs, etc. in order to better understand the evolution of downtown. Next, hit the street and begin an assessment of the district from a design perspective.

A sample assessment form is included in the Appendix. A example outline of an analysis is as follows:

■ Streetscape and Public Improvements

Analysis - note whether positive, negative, or neutral and suggested improvements/changes:

- Patterns of use - attractions
- Access and entry to downtown
- Traffic circulation
- Parking locations
- Pedestrian circulation
- Topography
- Views and vistas
- Landscaped areas
- Parks and open spaces
- Potential redevelopment areas
- Utilities: streetlights, wires, signals, signs

■ Buildings

Analysis - note whether positive, negative, or neutral and suggested Condition/Level of Alterations - poor (bad rehab)/fair (minor changes required/ fully renovated)

Also, in general, the following can be noted:

- Architectural styles and/or building elements
- Dates of construction
- Materials - brick/frame/stucco/stone
- Types of buildings - historic/non historic; mercantile; white elephants; train stations; institutional; residential; auto-oriented; government; etc.
- Typical first floor uses - retail/office/service/vacant
- Typical upper floor uses - apartment/office/storage/vacant
- Typical height -1, 2, 3 stories, etc.

Note: The new **BOOMS Tracker App** from the Main Street America is a tool for inventorying buildings in downtown: <https://mainstreet.org/the-latest/news/building-opportunities-on-main-street-through-the-booms-tracker>

Example of a community doing a walking tour assessment of the downtown.



4. Steps for Making Improvements

C. IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES AND PROBLEMS

Working together as a team, begin to assemble all the assessment findings in order to identify problems and opportunities. Typically, opportunities can be low hanging fruit that are easy and quick to accomplish but they can also be longer term, larger projects and efforts. Clearly identifying problems and opportunities in the publicly owned areas as well as private properties will guide the downtown to potential improvements.

As opportunities and problems are identified, keep the following key questions in mind about the downtown:

- Is the downtown inviting?
- Are buildings and public spaces in good condition and well maintained?
- Is it easy for visitors to get to downtown and find destinations?
- What is the quality of new work that has occurred?
- What is compelling about your downtown, is its story being told?

Commonly Found Opportunities

- Existing historic building stock and infrastructure
- Central location
- Variety of uses
- Pedestrian oriented- walkable
- Opportunities for new development or redevelopment

Commonly Found Problems and Why They Exist

Buildings-

- Poor Maintenance, lack of care
- Repairs that are poorly executed and poorly designed.
- Original materials and elements missing or replaced with inappropriate elements and materials
- Demolition
- Vacant, underutilized buildings and sites
- Inappropriate new construction
- Poor or obsolete signs



Photographs of existing conditions and issues are helpful tools in the analysis of a district.



Example of masonry issues including spalling brick, peeling paint, and needed repointing.

4. Steps for Making Improvements

Streetscapes and Public Spaces

- Poor or deferred maintenance, lack of care
- Aging infrastructure
- Features and fixtures are not appropriate for downtown such as lighting, trash receptacles etc.
- Parking is unattractive, inadequate, or poorly managed
- Inconvenient traffic patterns
- Poor signage

Corridor Entrances to Downtown

- Auto oriented
- Cluttered with signs
- Poor directional signs to downtown
- Traffic is routed around downtown, not to it
- Lack amenities such as landscaping and attractive lighting
- Some corridors are residential that have been zoned business creating an unattractive transition stage with parking in front yards, etc.



Example of streetscape issues including failing sidewalks and street paving.



Example of corridor entrance needing landscape design, installation, and maintenance.

4. Steps for Making Improvements

D. FORMULATE PLAN OF ACTION FOR GOOD DESIGN SOLUTIONS

Later sections in this design guide go into more detail about planning and guidelines for appropriate improvements to buildings and streetscape. The following are some general guiding points for the Main Street organization as they work with property owners and the public sector on making design improvements in downtown.

Finding good design solutions - some design principles for historic downtowns:

- Preservation and Reuse - "recycling at its best!"
- Authenticity - "to thine own style be true!"
- Contextualism - "this isn't someplace else"
- Quality - "do it right the first time"
- Pedestrian-oriented - "we aren't on the strip anymore"
- Mixed-use - "learning to share again"

Formulating and implementing a plan of action includes:

Background Work

- Design committee and program manager establish a process and include key property owners and public entities
- Establish goals
- Inventory and assess downtown design character
- Identify problems and opportunities
- Set standards and process with the goal of quality
- Adopt a design plan with priorities and deadlines.

Foreground Work

- Educating the community
- Fostering the public-private partnership
- Creating and promoting Incentives
- Establish awards and recognition methods

Sample short-term and small projects

- Façade improvements
- Public improvements
- Trash cans and banners
- Paint utility poles
- Remove sign clutter
- Clean streets and sidewalks
- Add planter boxes
- Repave and repaint parking lots

Sample longer-term and large projects

- Façade improvements
- Major building rehabilitations
- New infill construction
- Public improvements
- Sidewalks, streetlights, and utilities
- Better entry and traffic circulation
- New landscaping
- New plazas or open spaces

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

A. TYPICAL DOWNTOWN COMMERCIAL BUILDING STYLES

Early on, tourists and natives alike thought of Virginia as being “Colonial”, when in fact, Virginia’s Main Streets have a rich tapestry of styles and types of buildings from reflecting various periods of history and development. The height, width, and form of buildings are remarkably similar. The decoration and style of a building, can range from Federal to Art Deco depending on the period in which it was constructed.

Federal and Greek Revival style buildings are generally two or three stories high, clad in wood or brick, and are characterized by a gable roof and multi-paned, shuttered windows. At the time they were constructed in the first part of the 19th century, the upper floors were



often the residence of the shopkeeper. The ground level doors and windows were tall, narrow openings that pierced the solid wall of the facade. Today, many of these buildings have been remodeled on the ground floor to allow for larger storefronts and display windows.



Italianate style

As tastes changed so did the style of commercial architecture. In the mid 19th century, the Italianate style emerged and can be found on most Virginia Main Streets. The Italianate style is rich in its many variations. The shed roof behind a parapet wall gives the front of the building the appearance of a flat roof. The junction of roof and facade was decorated with ornate bracketed cornices constructed of wood, metal or corbelled brick. Window openings were often arched and decorated



Romanesque Revival style



Second Empire style

like the cornice, with hoods made of metal, wood or brick. Improved glass and iron technology of the period allowed larger and more transparent storefronts.

At the end of the 19th century, the composition of the commercial facade was firmly established. Ground floors were entirely transparent storefronts, the upper facade contained small windows reflecting residential or office use, and the front was crowned by a heavy cornice. The style of decoration varied greatly as this was the height of the eclectic period of American architecture. Queen Anne, Second Empire, and Romanesque Revival styles were employed to decorate the facade. Towers, projecting bays, sawn decorative features, and milled scrollwork characterize Queen Anne while the mansard roof defined the Second Empire style. The Romanesque Revival style employed varied textures and colors of brick and stone in conjunction with bold arches. Variations of all these styles can be found on many of Virginia’s Main Streets.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines



Colonial Revival style

At the turn of the 20th century, architects, designers, and builders were turning to the calmer, more orderly classical styles of Greece and Rome as well as to America's colonial past. This change can be seen in the design of many important public buildings and institutions. At the same time, decoration on mercantile buildings became more subdued. In many cities simply patterned or corbelled brick defined cornices and window hoods.



Early 20th c. Vernacular style

During the 1920's and 30's the Art Deco style emerged. This style was characterized by a combination of streamlined elements and geometric motifs. New materials, such as metal and structural glass were used. Art Deco was used to remodel and update many commercial storefronts in Virginia. Wood storefronts were removed and replaced by metal and Cararra glass (a pigmented structural glass often applied to piers, bulkheads, and cornice areas). Structural glass was eventually replaced by enameled masonite panels, which gave the same effect. Today, some of these remodelings are significant in their own right and should be retained if possible.



Art Deco style

The goal of the Virginia Main Street is to improve the physical appearance of the Commonwealth's downtowns. Since most of these areas contain many historic structures, the design philosophy of the program is to build on the image of these significant buildings by recommending improvements that will respect their original design.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

B. FACADE DESIGN BASICS

Note: See “Keeping Up Appearances” by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, guidelines on façade improvements in Appendix.

Most of Virginia’s Main Streets are made up of retail commercial buildings, and most are remarkably similar. Even though a building may have been constructed in the early 19th century to the early 20th century, its elements are very much like those of its neighbor or commercial buildings in a nearby town. The similarity of parts gives Virginia’s older downtowns a cohesiveness while varying style and detail will give a building and a community its uniqueness and individuality.

Historic commercial buildings include three distinctive parts: 1) the roof cornice, 2) the upper facade with its rhythmically placed windows, and 3) the first floor storefront opening. Most commercial buildings have no setback from their front property line. Instead, these buildings adjoin the sidewalk directly and they share common side walls the neighboring buildings. They are generally 20-40 feet wide and were designed for retail trade on the ground floor with residential or office space above.



Historic downtowns typically have stylistic variety with consistency of storefronts and upper facades as this diagram illustrates.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

There are exceptions to this formula. For instance, some retail trade buildings constructed in the first part of the 19th century may still retain small windows and solid masonry walls on the first floor instead of the characteristic storefront. However, many of these early buildings were altered as steel and glass technology allowed larger storefronts with broad expanses of glass. Another modification to this formula are larger buildings that may have 2 to 3 storefronts making the building closer to 100' wide. The rhythm and size of the storefronts would be the same as a single storefront building and upper facades and cornices would also be similar. Whether a single storefront or multiple, many historic downtown commercial buildings have a separate entrance to the upper floors. If they don't have a separate entrance, the building was likely designed to have one use and if it was mercantile on the first floor, the upper floors were likely used for storage of goods.

In general, most commercial buildings in Virginia are masonry and most frequently brick. Trim is generally wood except for cornices which can be wood, metal, or masonry. Nineteenth century storefronts may be supported by cast iron columns and early 20th century storefronts may have brass or bronze trim.

The shed roof is typical for late 19th century buildings, while gable roofs are more common on earlier buildings. Upper story windows are generally double hung sash and come in a variety of patterns depending on the date of construction and style of the building.



19 C. two-story, small first floor windows

Historically, the storefronts of most commercial buildings have been changed more than any other part of the building. When originally constructed, a typical late 19th century storefront may have had a cornice, transom windows, large display windows, a bulkhead and a recessed entrance. Over the years, as fashions changed and as repairs were required, the storefront was altered. Sometimes as storefronts are rehabilitated, elements of the original storefront may be found intact under layers of remodeling. In some cases, alterations to the storefront have become significant in their own right and the storefront should not be altered again.



19 C. three-story, two storefronts

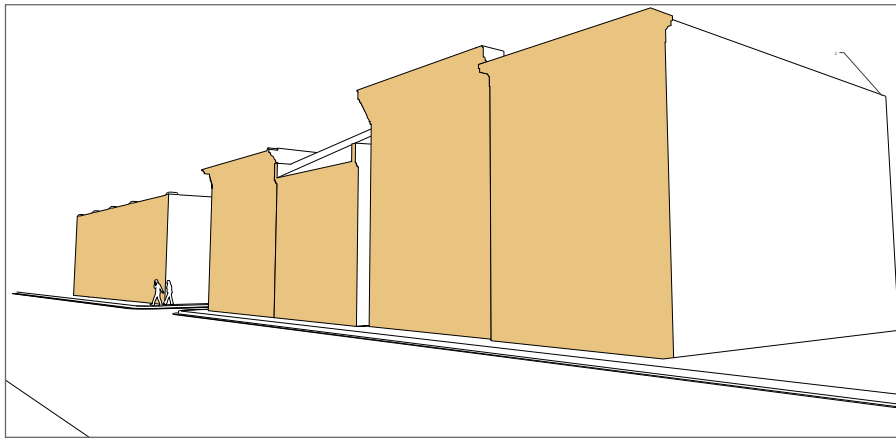
5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

Before rehabilitating a commercial building, determine what elements are original, what elements are missing that can be made and reinstalled, or if original detail is missing, what new design would be appropriate for the style and period of the building.

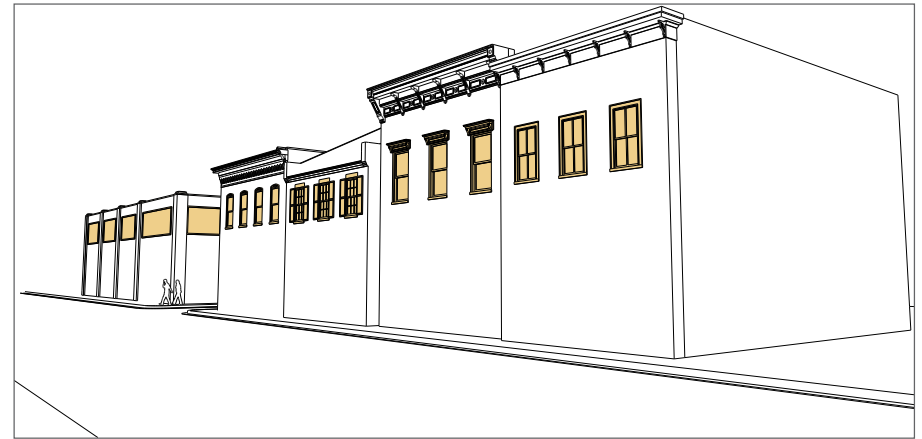
As modern architecture grew in popularity, various components produced for new construction were introduced to the faces of historic commercial buildings. Commonly found features include corrugated

metal, enameled steel panels, aluminum display window framing and aluminum framed store doors.

Later still, more economical materials were introduced such as vinyl siding and vertical wood paneling. In many cases these materials were appropriate for other types of buildings but when introduced to historic commercial buildings they often created a jarring and disjointed appearance.



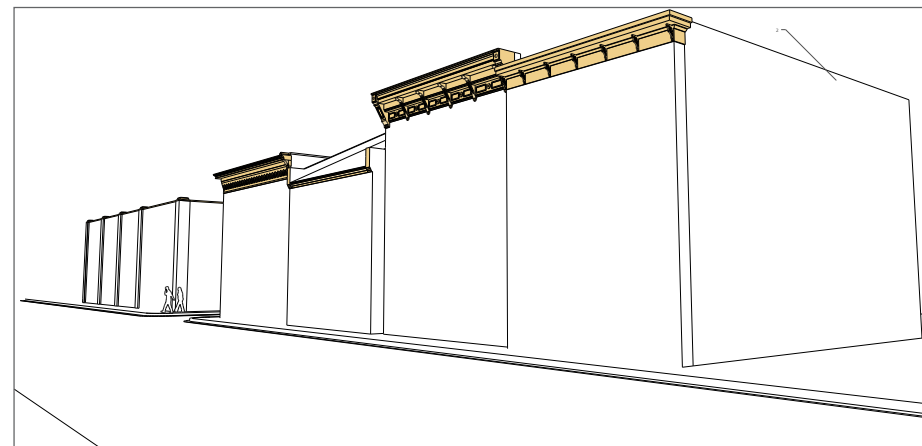
Front facades creates the wall of Main Street typically with zero setback.



Upper floors are typically smaller double hung windows of variety of styles.



The first floor is typically transparent storefronts.



Front facades are typically capped with a cornice.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

C. FACADE REHABILITATION PRINCIPLES

Key design principles that apply to any downtown façade rehabilitation project include:

- Preservation and reuse of existing resources;
- Authenticity;
- Quality construction and materials;
- Maintenance and cost effectiveness.

When these principles are followed, a whole downtown comes together as an authentic, engaging place to be. Virginia's Main Street communities have followed these principles over the years and are inviting places to visit, live, and do business.

Building facades that have not been recently rehabilitated may have issues with inappropriate or poorly implemented prior improvements and a lack of maintenance. Early on, the feasibility for fixing up historic downtown buildings was hampered by the feasibility of being able to pay off the renovation costs. Historic rehabilitation tax credits and the growing desirability for increasing businesses and residences in downtown has greatly improved the reinvestment climate in Virginia's historic downtowns.

Appearance equals image of a building, a business and a downtown area hence why rehabbing facades became so important early on with the Main Street program. Better Appearance comes from maintenance, good design, and quality improvements and good appearance leads to an inviting place to do business

Façade improvements begin with maintenance then move to repair and cleaning a façade. Research on the building can then identify elements that may have been added or changed that are not historically original or appropriate and can be selectively removed.

Research can also identify missing elements such as cornices that can be reconstructed and reinstalled. Cosmetic improvements include elements such as paint (only on previously painted surfaces), signs, and awnings.

There are essential Do's and Don'ts for façade improvements. They include:

- DO use inherent architectural character of the building
- DO be authentic, look for historic photos or plans of the building
- DO use the Secretary of the Interiors Standards
- DO NOT seek to create a false historic appearance
- DO NOT make a building look like another type of building

Design and rehabilitation standards resources include the following:

- Secretary of the Interior's Standards;
- Local Design Guidelines if there is a local historic district;
- National Main Street Center Publications;
- National Park Service Preservation Briefs and Tech Sheets
- Buildings Codes and Zoning Regulations

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

D. MAINTENANCE - THE FIRST STEP IN FACADE IMPROVEMENTS

Before considering an attractive awning or new storefront, owners of commercial buildings in Virginia's historic downtowns need to take a close look at the condition of their building. Proper maintenance is the first step in a comprehensive facade improvement and maintenance should not be limited to the front facade. It should include all areas of the building - interior and exterior - front, sides, rear, roof, foundation, and site.

A comprehensive inspection is particularly important on downtown commercial buildings since maintenance may have been deferred for many years. Often, when the ground floor is the only occupied space of a two to three story building, roof leaks, broken upper floor windows, and deteriorating mortar have gone unnoticed and unchecked.

Some maintenance problems are obvious and easily repaired, such as missing downspouts and peeling paint. Other symptoms, such as cracks in brick walls, a sagging roof ridge, or window openings that are no longer square, may be evident but their cause and treatment may not be as easily apparent. These symptoms may indicate settling over time that presents no problem or need of repair. However, these conditions could indicate structural problems due to rot or material failure. Problems of this sort would require inspection by qualified architects or engineers and a resulting repair program.

Cosmetic facade improvements such as paint, signs, and awnings can improve the image of a business and call attention to the architectural quality of the building. Facade improvements also play a key role in the economic revitalization of downtown by contributing to the overall positive image of downtown. Below is a checklist of typical maintenance problems that building owners can use to begin the inspection process. See other sections of these guidelines for more

information on maintenance and rehabilitation of historic facades. Architects, engineers and contractors can be called into the inspection process as well.

ROOF

- Metal roofs (except copper) should be painted, free of rust and holes, and joints should be unbroken.
- Slate should not be missing, flaking, or losing nails.
- Asphalt shingles should not be losing mineral granules or look worn.

FLASHING

- All edges where roof meets a vertical element (such as parapet walls) and projections (such as chimneys) require base flashing and counter flashing.
- Flashing should be painted (except copper), free from corrosion, and well caulked



GUTTERS AND DOWNSPOUTS

- Gutters are intact, attached properly, free of corrosion and painted to match the surface to which they are attached.
- Downspouts are intact, seal between gutter and downspout is secure, and without leaks.
- Water is conducted away from the building foundation by way of a splashblock or into a storm drain.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

MASONRY

- Mortar should be reasonably sound.
- If unpainted brick is spalling, it may be soft brick that needs replacing.
- If painted brick is spalling, water has been trapped behind the paint, and has frozen and thawed which has caused the brick to deteriorate. Explore options for removing paint.
- Horizontal cracks are not serious, vertical and diagonal cracks can be serious and require further inspection by professionals.
- Signs of moisture, such as visibly damp walls, moss, and peeling paint, should be inspected for source of water infiltration.



STOREFRONTS

- All wood elements should be free from deterioration.
- All storefront glass should be securely set into the frame.
- Doors and hardware should be in good working order.

PAINT

- All wood and metal surfaces should be painted.
- Painted masonry should be inspected for signs of paint failure and repainted to prevent water infiltration.



WINDOWS

- Historic original windows should be retained, repaired and preserved.
- Sash should fit the frame properly and ropes and weights should be operating smoothly.
- Joints between window frame and masonry wall should be caulked.
- Glass should not be broken or missing and all putty should be sound and painted.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

E. TYPICAL FACADE MATERIALS AND GUIDELINES

MASONRY

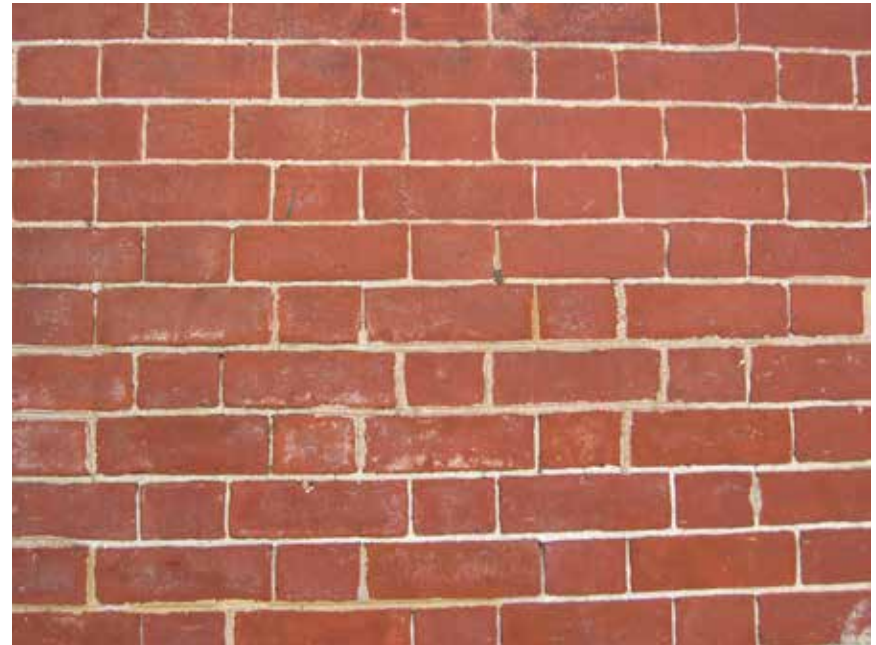
Masonry has been one of the most significant and commonly used materials in building construction since classical times. Historic masonry materials include brick, stone, terracotta, concrete, stucco, tile, and mortar. Brick is used on most commercial buildings in Virginia's Main Street communities.

There are a variety of ways that brick was laid and mortared. Understanding materials and methods is important to rehabilitating existing historic facades. Finding a skilled mason is essential to appropriate repairs and restoration.



GUIDELINES

1. Retain masonry features that are important in defining the overall character of the building.
2. Leave unpainted masonry unpainted.
3. Repair or replace a masonry feature when necessary by using a replacement material with the size, texture, color, and pattern of the historic material, as well as, the same mortar joint size and tooling.
4. Repair by repointing only areas where mortar has deteriorated. Sound mortar should be left intact.
5. When repairing masonry, remove deteriorated mortar by carefully hand-raking the joints to avoid damaging the masonry. Approximately a one-inch depth of existing mortar should be removed, if possible, to allow for the new mortar.



5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

6. Duplicate replacement mortar in strength, composition, color, and texture; an analysis of a mortar sample can aid in identifying its composition.

- a. Appearance: Duplicate old mortar joints in width and profile.
- b. Color: Match the color of the new mortar to that of a clean section of existing mortar.
- c. Strength: Do not repoint with mortar that is stronger than the original mortar and brick. Brick expands and contracts with freezing and heating conditions, and old mortar moves to relieve the stress. If a hard mortar with too much Portland cement is used, the mortar will not flex as much, which can cause the brick to crack, break, or spall.
- d. Composition: Mortar of older brick buildings has a higher lime and sand content, usually one part lime to two parts sand. Portland cement may be substituted for a portion of the lime if the mortar mix is no more than 20 percent Portland cement.

7. If painted masonry needs repainting, follow these steps:

- a. Remove deteriorated paint to the next sound layer by hand-scraping. Do not completely remove paint that is well adhered because breaking that bond could damage the masonry.
- b. Clean with a low-pressure water wash if the building is dirty.
- c. Allow masonry to dry for at least 14 days before applying the paint.
- d. Prime with an appropriate masonry primer.
- e. Repaint with an appropriate masonry paint system as recommended by the paint manufacturer.



8. Prevent water from entering masonry walls by ensuring the roof is secure, flashing is maintained, and gutters and downfalls are working properly.

9. Ensure that cracks do not indicate structural settling or deterioration. Repair cracks and unsound mortar areas according to the guidelines later in this section.

10. Brick should be cleaned only when necessary to remove heavy paint buildup, halt deterioration, or remove heavy soiling.

11. The best method for cleaning unpainted brick is to use a low-pressure wash of no more than 200 psi, equivalent to the pressure in a garden hose. A mild detergent may be added when necessary.

12. Test any detergent or chemical cleaner on a small, inconspicuous part of the building first. Older brick may be too soft to clean and can be damaged by detergents and by the pressure of the water. This test is a mandatory step if you are applying for federal or state rehabilitation tax credits.

13. Use chemical paint and dirt removers formulated for masonry cautiously. Do not clean with chemical methods that damage masonry, and do not leave chemical cleaners on the masonry longer than recommended.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines



INAPPROPRIATE TREATMENTS

14. Do not sandblast masonry, use high-pressure water blasting, or chemically clean with an inappropriate cleanser since these methods can do irreparable damage.
 15. Do not repoint masonry with a synthetic caulking compound or Portland cement as a substitute for mortar.
 16. Do not use a scrub coating—a thinned, low-aggregate coat of mortar brushed over the entire masonry surface and then scrubbed off the bricks after drying—as a substitute for traditional repointing.
 17. Do not remove mortar with electric saws or oversized grinders that can damage the surrounding masonry.
 18. Do not use waterproof, water-repellent, or non-historic coatings on masonry unless they allow moisture to breathe through the masonry. Use an anti-graffiti coating on masonry areas that have seen repeated vandalism and where improved shielded lighting and other security measures have not been successful.
- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
 - Preservation Brief #1 - Cleaning and Water-Repellent Treatments for Historic Masonry Buildings
 - Preservation Brief #2 - Repointing Mortar Joints in Historic Masonry Buildings
 - Preservation Brief #6 - Dangers of Abrasive Cleaning to Historic Buildings
 - Preservation Brief #15 - Preservation of Historic Concrete
 - Preservation Brief #39 - Holding the Line: Controlling Unwanted Moisture in Historic Buildings

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

WOOD

The availability and flexibility of wood has made it the most common building material throughout much of America's building history, particularly for framing, siding, windows, and doors and is a common building material on Virginia's Main Street historic downtown commercial buildings. Because it can be shaped easily by sawing, planing, and carving, wood is also used for a broad range of exterior decorative elements such as cornices, brackets, dentils, modillion blocks, columns, piers, railings, and trim.

GUIDELINES

1. Retain wood as one of the dominant cladding and decorative materials.
2. Repair rotted or missing sections rather than replacing the entire element.
3. Use new or salvaged wood, epoxy consolidants, or fillers to patch, piece, or consolidate parts.
4. Match existing historic materials and details.
5. Replace wood elements only when they are rotted beyond repair.
6. Match the original in material and design or use surviving material.
7. Base the design of reconstructed elements on pictorial or physical evidence from the actual building rather than from similar buildings in the area.
8. Keep wood free from water infiltration and wood-boring pests.

9. Identify sources of moisture problems, and take appropriate measures to fix them.

- a. Remove vegetation that grows too closely to wood, and take any other steps necessary to ensure the free circulation of air near wood building elements.



- b. Repair leaking roofs, gutters, downspouts, and flashing.

10. Keep all wood surfaces primed and painted.

11. Re-caulk joints where moisture might penetrate a building.

- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
- Preservation Brief #9 - The Repair of Historic Wooden Windows



5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

STUCCO

Stucco is a type of exterior plaster. It may be applied directly over masonry or applied over wood or metal lath on a wood structure. Stucco can be finished in numerous surface textures dictated by the style of the building including smooth, roughcast, sponged, and scored. Smooth-finished stucco may provide a more refined appearance and often was scored, historically, to resemble stone. While stucco is considered a protective coating, it is highly susceptible to water damage, particularly if the structure underneath is damaged. Historic stucco needs regular maintenance to keep it in good condition.

GUIDELINES

1. Maintain historic stucco. It is a character-defining material that has acquired significance over time. A stucco surface also may have been applied to your building as an early alteration. As a secondary material, it may have acquired its own significance over time and should also be retained if now considered a character-defining feature.
2. Repair any water damage to the underlying structure to provide a sound base for necessary stucco repairs.
3. Repair stucco or plastering by removing loose material and patching with a new material that is similar in strength, composition, color, and texture.
4. Use a professional plasterer for stucco repair. A qualified trades person will assess the damage and perform an analysis to match the new stucco composition to the existing material.
5. After repairs have been made, stucco buildings may require repainting. Consult a professional to determine the appropriate compatible paint for the existing surface coating.



Detail showing texture of stucco above. Right, stucco applied to the upper floor of a downtown commercial building.



6. Replace stucco completely if more than half of the surface area has lost its bond with the substrate.
 7. Look for signs of water infiltration from the roof, chimneys, window and door openings, and at the foundation. Isolate the source of moisture and take remedial action.
 8. Check for cracks in the stucco that may arise from settlement, excessive vibration, or the failure of old repairs due to incompatible material strength and composition.
 9. Seal hairline cracks with a coat of finish coat stucco, paint, or whitewash.
 10. Clean a stucco building using the most gentle means possible, preferably a low-pressure water wash and soft bristle brush. Take care not to damage the surface texture.
- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
 - Preservation Brief #22 The Preservation and Repair of Historic Stucco

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

METALS

With the rise of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, a variety of new metals began to appear in building construction. Lead, tinplate, terne-plate zinc, copper, iron (wrought and cast), steel, aluminum, nickel, bronze and brass (alloys of copper), and galvanized sheet iron (steel coated with zinc) have been used at various times for different architectural features. Some decorative elements on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century buildings appear to be wood but are actually metal. Various metals are used for roof materials and details, as well as for railings, cornices, storefront elements, window frames and hardware.

GUIDELINES

1. Character-defining metal elements should be retained.
2. Deteriorated metals should be repaired or replaced as necessary with in-kind materials.
3. If reinstalling two adjoining incompatible metals together, a gasket should separate the different materials to prevent deterioration.



Many downtown buildings have elements made of metal such as the cornice example (left) and the roof example (right).

MAINTENANCE

1. Inspect metal surfaces for signs of corrosion, mechanical breakdown, and connection failure. Eliminate excessive moisture problems. Maintain existing paint coatings or other protective materials.
 2. Use the gentlest means possible when cleaning metals.
 3. Prepare for repainting by hand-scraping or brushing with natural bristle brushes to remove loose and peeling paint. Removing paint down to the bare metal is not necessary, but removal of all corrosion is essential.
 4. Clean cast iron and iron alloys (hard metals) with a low-pressure, dry-grit blasting (80-100 pounds per square inch) if gentle means do not remove old paint properly. Protect adjacent wood or masonry surfaces from the grit.
- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
 - Preservation Brief #27
The Maintenance and Repair of Cast Iron



5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

GLASS

Early blown glass from the 18th century and the first part of the 19th century was expensive and could only be made in small sizes. By the 1850s, stronger and inexpensive cast plate glass could be made in much larger sheets; this development allowed for larger and fewer window panes. It also allowed for the widespread expansion of larger glass storefronts in commercial buildings.

In addition to the clear glass used in windows and storefronts, decorative glass is often seen on historic commercial facades. A large variety of more modern glass types were introduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Decorative glass comes in many forms, such as beveled, stained, leaded, etched, frosted, textured, patterned, leaded, and painted. Most often, decorative glass is used in windows, sidelights, and a transom window as part of an entry design or in a transom over a commercial storefront.

Prismatic glass was introduced in the 1890s and was primarily used for storefront transoms through the 1930s. These molded glass tiles reflected light into the interior of the building and were typically joined together using zinc or lead caming as was stained glass. Structural pigmented glass, sold under brand names such as Vitrolite and Carrara Glass, dates to the early twentieth century. It was marketed as a modern, cost-effective alternative to marble cladding. Technological advances allowed existing materials to be used in new ways and provided character-defining materials synonymous with the Art Deco, Streamline, and Moderne architectural styles.

GUIDELINES

1. Retain original or historic window glazing when possible. Decorative glass may have been covered up by wood panels, particularly in transoms over storefronts.

2. If necessary, replace glass with new glass to match the original with the same color, thickness, and glazing method if possible.

3. If original glass in a transom has been removed and it can be documented that it was previously installed, consider reinstalling a similar glass.

4. Repair rather than replace cracked structural glass panels.

5. If it is necessary to remove structural glass panels due to adhesive failure. Commercial solvents should be used to dissolve the hardened mastic and allow the panels to be removed without damage.

6. Pigmented structural glass is no longer manufactured so finding replacement pieces can be difficult. Consolidate the original materials to the most prominent location, and use substitute materials on less visible elevations.

- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
- Preservation Brief #33 - The Preservation and Repair of Stained and Leaded Glass



Storefront glass is a key material of the downtown experience as shown in this display window and transom.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

F. TYPICAL FAÇADE COMPONENTS AND GUIDELINES

Before rehabilitating a commercial building, determine what components are original or early remodeling, what elements are missing that can be made and reinstalled, or if original detail is missing, what new design would be appropriate for the style and period of the building. Old photographs can help to determine what is original and what is not.

The following information discusses various components of a commercial building façade.

STOREFRONTS

Historically, the storefronts of most commercial buildings have been changed more than any other part of the building. When originally constructed, a typical late 19th century storefront may have had a cornice, transom windows, large display windows, a bulkhead, and a recessed entrance. Its transparent windows were designed to draw the customer or client to the business within as well as to display the merchandise sold there. At night, the lit storefront helps illuminate the sidewalk and add visual interest for downtown visitors.

Over the years, as fashions changed and as repairs were required, the storefront was altered. During rehabilitated, elements of the original storefront can sometimes be found under layers of remodeling. In some cases, alterations to the storefront have become significant in their own right and the storefront should not be altered again.

For storefronts, the original storefront was supported by a beam and piers. Piers will most likely be the same material as the wall of the upper facade and should be the same color if painted. The beam is typically concealed by the storefront cornice which may be either wood, metal, or brick. If designing a new storefront that fits the opening, refer to old photographs, and ensure the new design respects the opening, proportions, and elements of a traditional storefront. The design generally should include a cornice, transom windows, display windows, and bulkhead. If a new storefront is not economically feasible, explore making some changes to make the existing one more compatible in appearance. Many times when new aluminum framed storefronts were installed, they were not as tall as the original storefront opening. The area between the top of the display and the beam (the old transom area) was framed in and covered up. Create a sign area and cornice that fits this area. This can help a standard modern storefront better suit the proportions of the original building.



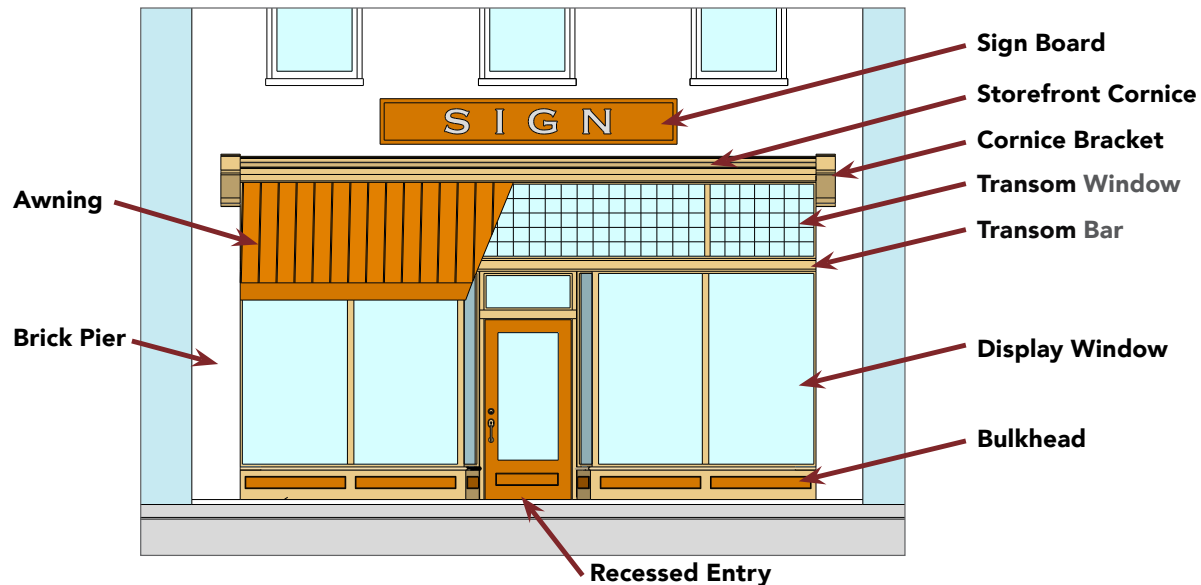
5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

GUIDELINES

1. Preserve all original storefront elements, materials, and features or early remodeling projects that have become significant in their own right; repair them as necessary.
2. Remove any non-historic inappropriate elements, materials, signs, or canopies that were added later and obscure original architectural elements. Covering up cornices, decorative features, or significant portions of the wall alters the building's proportions and changes its appearance; these alterations should be removed.
3. If significant storefront features are uncovered in any careful exploratory demolition, assess their condition for preserving, repairing, or reconstructing them.
4. Reconstruct missing elements (such as cornices, transoms, and bulkheads) with physical evidence or from historic photos if available. Otherwise, design simplified new elements that respect the character, materials, and design of the building.

5. Avoid using or retaining materials and elements that are incompatible with the building or district. Depending on the style and age of the commercial building, these may include: unpainted aluminum-frame windows and doors, unpainted aluminum panels or display framing, reflective or tinted glass display windows, T1-11, vinyl or aluminum siding, EFIS (artificial stucco), wood shingles, mansard roofs, metal awnings, coach lanterns, residential styled solid doors, plastic shutters, inoperable shutters, or shutters on windows where they never previously existed. Avoid creating false historical appearances like "Colonial," "Olde English," or other theme storefront designs which are not appropriate for the authentic historic buildings in the downtown.

- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
- Preservation Brief #11 Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts



5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

WINDOWS

Windows are one of the major character-defining features on most historic buildings. Their size, sash type, framing, details, and arrangements play a major part in defining the style, scale, and character of a building. The function of windows adds light to the interior of a building, provides ventilation, and allows a visual link to the outside.

On commercial buildings the upper façade contains windows that help define the character of the building and may provide a pattern of openings with neighboring buildings to form the street wall of the entire block. Facade windows may be more decorated than windows on secondary elevations, which may be more utilitarian and may have been blocked in or covered up.



REPLACEMENT OF HISTORIC WINDOWS

Care should be taken before deciding to replace existing historic windows for the following reasons:

- Historic wooden windows are often constructed of old growth wood that has dense growth rings and provides for better resistance to water and insect damage. These types of windows therefore last much longer than wood windows made with recent growth wood. Historic wood windows may often be repaired and their life extended through several rebuilding phases instead of replacement.
- Often historic windows are replaced to save energy costs and to prevent air infiltration. Studies have shown that a properly maintained historic window with a well fitted storm window can be just as efficient as a double-paned replacement window with simulated divided lights.
- Vinyl windows may have an average life of 20 to 25 years before they will need to be replaced again and they cannot be repaired easily, or at all, if there is failure of their material or sealing.
- Window replacement generally is a poor investment since the payback time for them usually is longer than the average individual owns the building.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

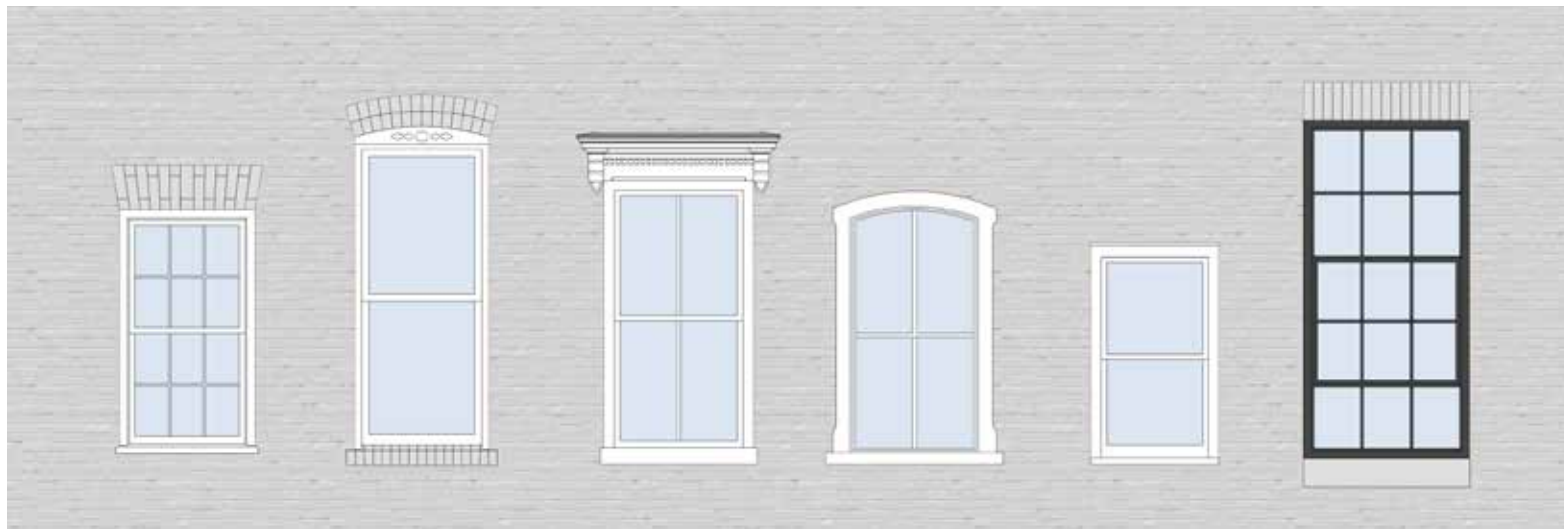
GUIDELINES

1. Retain and preserve windows that contribute to the overall historic character of a building, including their functional and decorative features such as frames, sash, muntins, sills, trim, surrounds, hardware, and shutters.
2. Repair original windows by patching, splicing, consolidating or otherwise reinforcing; replace only those features that are beyond repair. Wood that appears to be in bad condition because of peeling paint or separated joints often can, in fact, be repaired rather than replaced.
3. Uncover, repair frames, and reinstall windows with their original dimensions where they have been removed or blocked in.

4. Replace the unit in-kind if replacement of a deteriorated window is necessary, by:
 - matching the design and dimension of the original frame and sash,
 - maintaining the original number and arrangement of panes,
 - using true divided lights, or three-part simulated divided lights with integral spacer bars and interior and exterior fixed muntins. There may be small variations such as the width and depth of the muntins and sash if those variations do not significantly impact the visual character of the historic window design.

5. Base reconstruction of any missing windows on physical evidence, similar remaining windows or historic photos.

- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
Preservation Brief #9:
- The Repair of Historic Wooden Window



Sample window types: six over six

one over one

two over two

steel multipane

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

DOORS

Many historic commercial buildings have a separate door that accesses the upper floors or a historic commercial building. The door typically has decorative trim and a transom window. The style of the building varies depending on the style and details of the commercial façade.

GUIDELINES

1. Retain and repair existing historic or original wooden door(s) and surrounding wood trim with matching materials. Reuse hardware and locks that are original or important to the historical evolution of the building.

2. Replace historic doors that are beyond repair with a new door of the same size, design, material and types as used originally, or sympathetic to the building style, including number and orientation of panel and location and size of any glass panes. The new door should match the original as closely as possible and be based on physical evidence and/or historic photos.



Original doors on historic downtown buildings were typically wood with large glass panels (above and left) and often had transom windows over the door.



In the 20th century, historic doors were often replaced with aluminum and glass doors (example to right). Doors from later buildings such as Art Deco style, may have had original metal doors which would be considered historic.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

CORNICES AND PARAPETS

Cornices and parapets are important character-defining features of most older commercial buildings in historic downtowns. The cornice occurs at the junction between the roof and the wall; it may be a decorated classical projection with dentils or modillion blocks or a flat decorative band within the wall material and may contain decorative elements like carved brackets. Cornices can be constructed from wood or separate wooden elements combined on site while some historic commercial buildings may have cornices (as well as other decorative elements) made of galvanized metal and painted to resemble wood.

Parapets are sections of a building's wall that extends above the roofline. These elements may just be an extension of the material and design of the wall or they may be a separate design from the rest of the wall. They can be a decorative feature and may be made of brick, stone, cast stone, wood or metal. Parapets often serve to screen any rooftop equipment, skylights or other roof features and projections.

GUIDELINES

1. Retain original cornices and parapets that define the architectural character of the historic building.
2. Keep the cornice or parapet well sealed and anchored and maintain the adjoining gutter systems and flashing to ensure against water entry.
3. Repair rather than replace existing cornice or parapet elements. If these elements are too deteriorated, match original materials, details, and profiles in-kind. Do not remove elements such as brackets or blocks that are part of the original composition without replacing them with new ones of a like design.
4. Replace any missing cornices or cornice or parapet components based on physical evidence or historic photos.



Sample wood cornice



Sample metal cornice



Sample brick cornice

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS AND TRIM

Decorative elements like window and door surrounds and caps, columns and piers, railings, and cornice trim and brackets, as well as masonry decorative elements and patterns, are all examples of details that add richness and integrity to the design of historic buildings.

GUIDELINES

1. Original architectural detailing should be maintained and preserved rather than removed, simplified and/or replaced.
2. If the detailing is deteriorated beyond repair, it should be duplicated using original building materials wherever possible or using an acceptable substitute which matches the original in composition, design, color, texture, and other visual qualities.
3. Any missing details should match the original as closely as possible and be based on physical evidence and/or historic photos.

Cornices and trim examples show the rich range of architectural details and trim on historic downtown buildings.



5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

AWNINGS, CANOPIES AND MARQUEES

Awnings were originally developed in classical times to provide shade for arena events and covers for market stalls; they were typically made from a canvas fabric (closely woven cotton). In the 19th century, they became popular to shield storefronts as the evolution of glass allowed larger display areas. The commercial application of awnings had multiple functions: it blocked the sun to reduce heat gain, protected products displayed in windows, shielded customers and other pedestrians passing by the business, and added a colorful element to attract more customers.

While canvas was the traditional material used for awnings, it often stretched and faded, was flammable, and was susceptible to mold and mildew. By the 1960s, vinyl resins, acrylic fibers, and polyester materials became more popular due to their longer lasting qualities. At the same time, aluminum and fiberglass awnings were introduced and became popular for commercial applications due to their longer lasting and lower maintenance characteristics. Many homeowners also installed these new types of awnings as well. Current fabric types include dyed acrylics and acrylic-coated poly-cotton blends. These newer materials are more similar to canvas in appearance and texture but have greater strength and durability.

Early 19th century awnings were attached to the building with grommets, hooks, or a long bar and stretched to a wooden frame and poles. Later in the 19th century, the invention of metal plumbing pipes allowed awnings to be attached to retractable frames that could be rolled up easily by ropes, pulleys, or a hand crank. There are a wide variety of these various retractable mechanisms and more recently, electric motors are used to retract and extend awnings in many applications. Due to the extended life of many modern fabrics, current awnings are often wrapped on a fixed frame that does not allow retraction or extension.

TYPES

Standard Sloped Fabric

Whether fixed or retractable, sloped awnings are the traditional awning type and are appropriate for most historic buildings. Sloped awnings may be used on new buildings as well.

Boxed or Curved Fabric

More contemporary design treatments, these types of awning rarely fit a historic building and they generally are not appropriate in the historic districts but may be used on non-historic or new commercial buildings.



Awnings come in a variety of options but always fit within the storefront or door opening.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

MATERIALS

Current awnings are made of a synthetic acrylic or polyester-cotton blend material. The important consideration for their use on historic facades is to have the appearance of traditional canvas. Vinyl coated or laminated awnings that have a shiny plastic-like appearance are not appropriate for historic facades. Aluminum or fiberglass awnings generally are not appropriate for historic facades. Some contemporary designs executed in metal or a combination of metal, glass or fabrics can be successfully used on non-historic elevations or new buildings.



Traditional fabric awning above.

Modern glass canopy below.

Metal canopy in the shape of a fabric awning



ATTACHMENTS

Awnings may be attached by a variety of ways as discussed in the introduction and likewise be extended and retracted by various mechanisms or they may cover a fixed frame.

DESIGN AND PLACEMENT

1. Place awnings carefully within the storefront, porch, door, or window openings so they do not obscure elements or damage materials.
2. Choose designs that do not interfere with existing signs or distinctive architectural features of the building, or with street trees or other elements along the street.
3. Choose an awning shape that fits the opening in which it is installed.
4. Make sure the bottom of the awning valance meets code requirements.

FABRIC AND COLOR

1. Coordinate colors with the overall building color scheme. Solid colors, wide stripes, and narrow stripes may be appropriate, but not overly bright or complex patterns.
2. Avoid using shiny plastic-like fabrics.

SIGNS

As appropriate, use the front panel or valance of an awning for a sign. Letters can be sewn, screened, or painted on the awning fabric; avoid hand-painted or individually made fabric letters that are not professionally applied.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

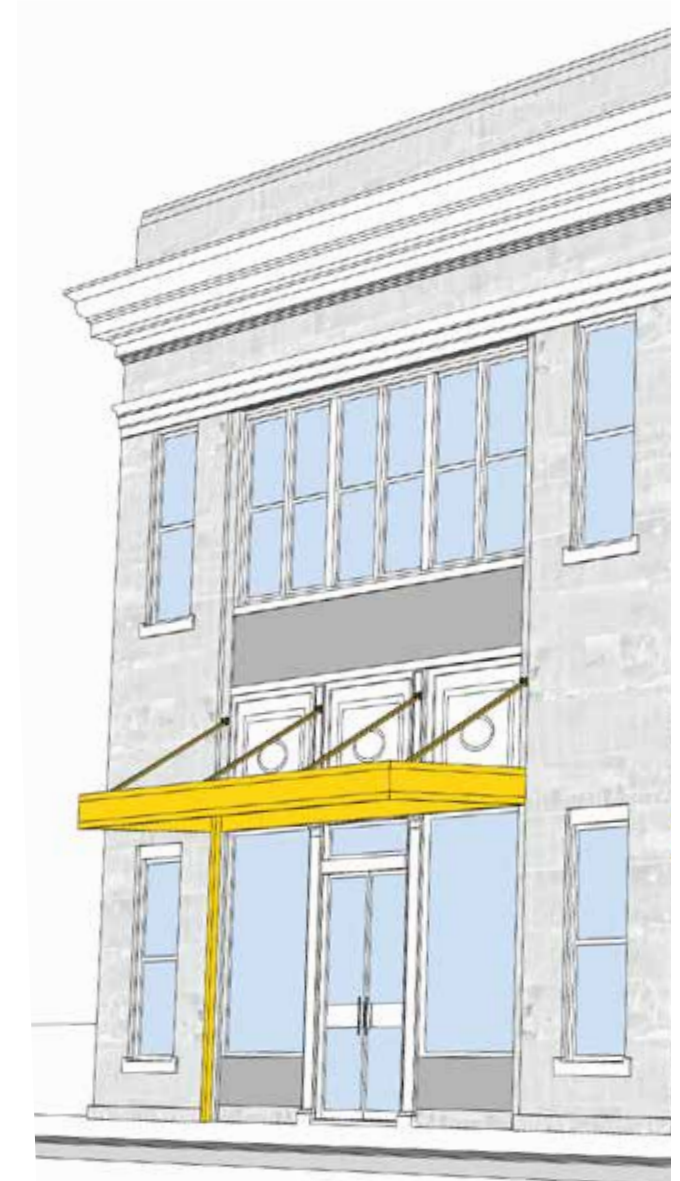
CANOPIES AND MARQUEES

Preserve and maintain historic canopies and marquees as an important character-defining feature on a historic facade. New examples may be appropriate on non-historic or new commercial buildings depending on its use. They should fit within the overall architectural design and not obscure important elements such as transoms or decorative glass.

- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
- Preservation Brief #44: The Use of Awnings on Historic Buildings: Repair, Replacement and New Design



Marquees are found on theaters and advertise upcoming shows and events. This example is the recently restored Lyric Theater in St. Paul, Virginia.



Canopies are often on downtown buildings that are more institutional and have a prominent entrance such as this bank example.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

COLOR AND PAINT

Painting is generally part of any facade improvement plan. Traditionally the use of paint has been the easiest way to change a business image or to “freshen-up” a building. However, from a preservation viewpoint, painting is more than cosmetic; it can be part of protective maintenance, or conversely, can be the catalyst for deterioration and later maintenance problems.

Paint colors offer a way that individual building owners can give their buildings a personal touch. Many downtown buildings in Virginia, however, are in historic districts where paint color selection can often mean the difference between a building’s blending with or conflicting with the general architectural character of the area.

What type of paint should be used? What colors are appropriate? When should brick be painted? How many colors can be used on commercial buildings?

The following are some “Rules of Thumb” for painting historic facades. These do not cover all conditions. For more information see:

- Preservation Brief 10 - Exterior Paint Problems on Historic Woodwork and Preservation Brief 1 - Cleaning and Waterproof Coating of Masonry Buildings. In addition, check with local paint suppliers for more in-depth information on products and application methods.

PAINT PREPARATION AND TYPES OF PAINT

1. Generally, do not paint existing materials that have historically never been painted, such as brick, stone, and copper.
2. Do not repaint surfaces when the existing paint is sound. This action will cause unnecessary paint build-up.
3. When repainting is required, remove loose and peeling paint

with the gentlest means possible using natural bristle brushes. Wash surfaces and let dry completely before repainting.

4. Use appropriate methods when more complete paint removal is required in order to reach a sound layer of paint before repainting. Use appropriate chemical removers for wood, brick, and stone. NEVER SANDBLAST, USE OPEN FLAMES, OR HIGH PRESSURE WATER WASH TO REMOVE PAINT.
5. Ensure that all surfaces are completely dry before painting. Two weeks of dry weather is ideal. Otherwise, paint can trap moisture, causing the paint to fail. In the case of masonry buildings, water trapped behind the paint can expand during cold weather and cause the brick or stone to spall. Likewise on wood surfaces, paint that fails allows water infiltration which can cause deterioration.
6. Prime surfaces with oil-based primer when the type of paint on the material to be painted is unknown. Metal surfaces require primers formulated specifically for metal.
7. Oil or alkyd paint can be applied directly over existing oil paint. Latex cannot be applied directly over oil. First use an oil-based primer formulated to accept latex paint.
8. Apply any finish according to these general rules, although finishes depend on the material being painted and to a certain extent on personal taste. Brick and stucco should have a flat finish; wood trim can range from semi-gloss to gloss; wood siding should be less glossy than the trim, either eggshell or semi-gloss.
9. Use the same paint system for primers and topcoats and use the best grade of paint you can afford. Discuss your project with the paint supplier and follow manufacturers specifications for mixing and application methods.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

COLOR

1. Look at old photographs for clues to color choice, tones, and placement.
2. When choosing colors, remember that colors for most late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century commercial buildings relate to colors found in nature. Paint colors that relate to the natural color of masonry materials is preferred. Brick color can range from buff to rust to burgundy. Stone color can be any shade of gray or tan, and some shades of red. Trim such as cornices and window hoods can simulate stone colors. Trim colors can range from browns, tans, or olives to shades of green, red, tan, or white.
3. If accurate historical colors are not preferred, use subtle shades of colors. Avoid colors that would be jarring to the area or conflict with surrounding building colors. Reserve bold accent colors for signs and doors.
4. Follow general guidelines on paint placement and the number of colors, which ultimately are the most important factors in a painting project. Three colors are generally enough to differentiate wall and trim and allow another color to accent the shutters, window sash, and doors. If a building is particularly elaborate, an additional trim color can be used that is a shade of the primary trim color. This color can be used to accentuate such features as recessed panels and pilasters. Avoid picking out small details such as brackets, dentils, and moldings with additional accent colors since this tends to fragment the appearance of the building. Storefront framing elements should be painted the same color as trim.



Commercial buildings generally have a wall color (or natural material color), a contrasting trim color and an accent color for doors, cornice and window details such as this example.,

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

SIGNS

Signs are a vital and a necessary part of the downtown scene. A balance should be struck between the need to call attention to individual businesses and the need for a positive image of the downtown historic district. Signs can complement or detract from the character of a building depending on their design, placement, number, and condition.

The character of signs should be harmonious to the character of the structure on which they are placed, which varies based on the building's type. Consider the relationship of surrounding buildings, compatible colors, appropriate materials, the style and size of the lettering and graphics, and the type of lighting.

It is important to refer to a community's sign ordinance for requirements and details on signs for downtown buildings.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. PLACEMENT

Place signs so that they are an integral part of the façade and do not obstruct architectural elements and details that define the design of the building. Locations should respect the signs of adjacent businesses.



2. NUMBER AND SIZE

The number of signs used should be limited to encourage compatibility with the building and discourage visual clutter. (See community ordinance for more information on what is allowed.)

3. DESIGN AND EXECUTION

Signs should be designed by a graphic or environmental designer or a sign company and executed by sign professionals. All signs should be compatible with and relate to the design elements of the building including proportions, scale, materials, color, and details. No single lettering style is preferred.

4. SHAPE

Shape of signs for commercial buildings can conform to the area where the sign is to be located. Likewise, a projecting sign may take on the shape of the product or service provided such as a shoe for a shoe store.

5. MATERIALS

Use traditional sign materials such as wood, glass, gold leaf, raised individual metal, or painted wood letters on wood, metal, or glass. More recent changes have created lettering and signs made of composite and vinyl materials that may be appropriate as well. Wall signs should not be painted directly on the surface of the wall. Window signs should be painted or have flat decal letters and should not be three dimensional.

6. COLOR

Use colors that complement the materials and color scheme of the building, including accent and trim colors.

7. ILLUMINATION

Generally, signs should be indirectly lit with a shielded incandescent light source. Internally lit signs generally are not recommended in a historic downtown but creative applications have been developed in recent years that, for instance, only illuminate the name of the business.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

8. BUILDINGS WITH MULTIPLE TENANTS

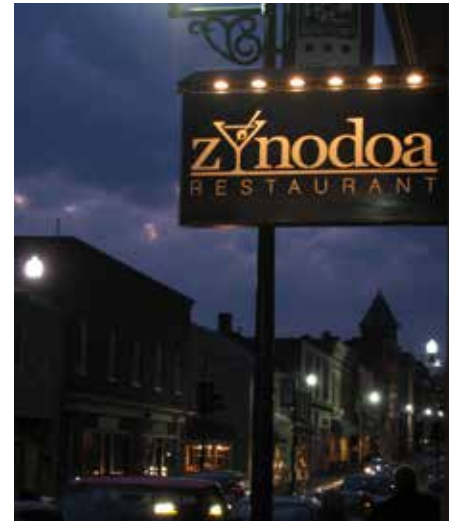
A master sign plan should be developed for a building that includes a directory sign that is coordinated with any other individual signs. Each business on the main level should have the same limits for total area computed as a portion of the individual building frontage.



GUIDELINES FOR SIGN TYPES

1. WALL SIGNS

Wall signs for commercial buildings can be located above the storefront, within the frieze of the cornice, on covered transoms, or on the pier that frames display windows, or generally on flat, unadorned surfaces of the facade or in areas clearly designed as sign locations.



2. PROJECTING SIGNS

A projecting sign is attached by a bracket or arm mounted perpendicular to the wall of a building, and it should be sized to be compatible with the facade. There should be sufficient height for clearance for pedestrians but the sign should generally not be higher than the window sill of the second story. Projecting signs should be hung at ninety degrees to the face of the building.

3. WINDOW SIGNS

Window signs are those attached to the inside or outside face of a window and are generally painted letters or decals. Window signs should be approximately at eye height for good pedestrian visibility. Optional locations include near the top or bottom of the storefront display window glass or on the glass panel of the entry door. Window signs are also appropriate on upper floor windows if there are separate tenants on that level.



4. CANOPY SIGNS

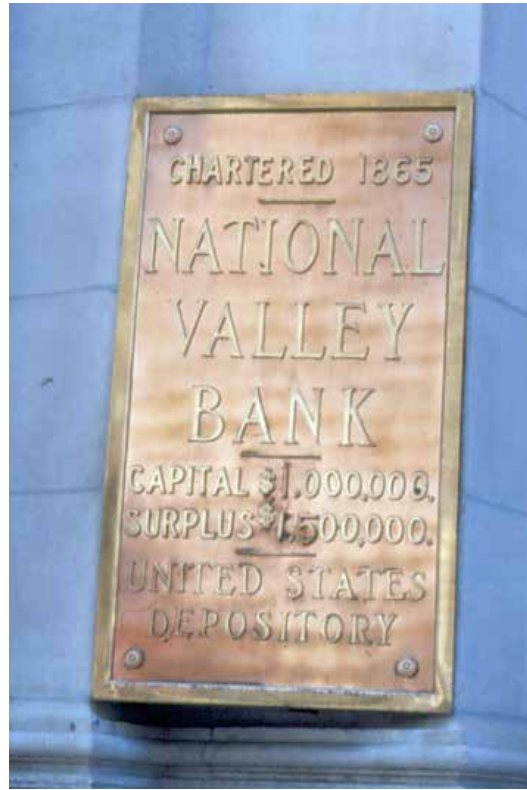
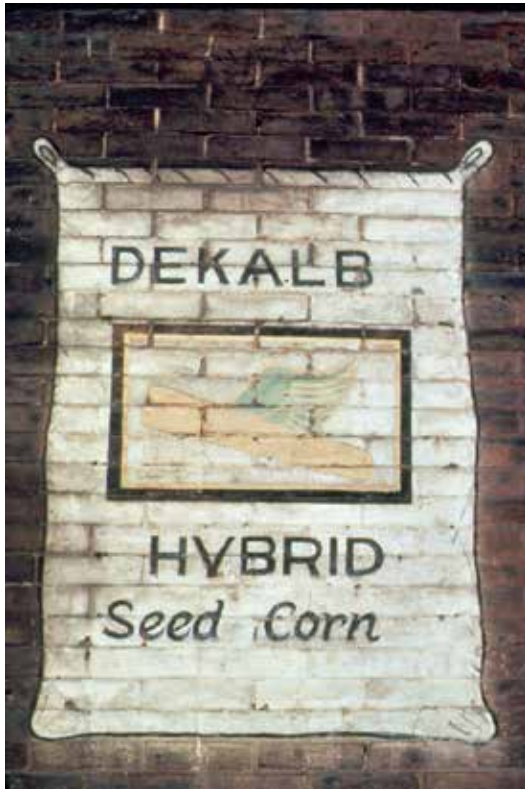
Awning and canopy signs should generally be placed on the valance area only. Letters may be painted, screened or sewn on the fabric.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

5. HISTORIC SIGNS

Historically significant signs are rare survivors on most historic buildings. Occasionally, a historic sign may remain from a prior business that was a prominent and a long-term establishment in the historic district. If the historic sign can be preserved without adversely affecting the current business, it should be retained if possible.

- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
- Preservation Brief #25 - The Preservation of Historic Signs



From signs painted on buildings to attached signs made of high quality materials to iconic business signs, evaluating and keeping historic signs that tell the story of a downtown is an important step.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

ACCESSIBILITY

See:

- Preservation Briefs: <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/preservation-briefs.htm>
- Preservation Brief #32: Making Historic Properties Accessible

The following is a summary of information found in this Preservation Brief.

Historically, most buildings were not designed to be readily accessible for people with disabilities. In recent years, however, emphasis has been placed on preserving historically significant properties, and on making these properties-and the activities within them-more accessible to people with disabilities. With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, access to properties open to the public is now a civil right. Planning for accessibility modifications should be a three-step process as identified in the Preservation Brief #32:

- Review the significance of the historic building and identifying its character-defining features;
- Assess the property's existing and required level of accessibility; and
- Evaluate accessibility options within a preservation context.

REVIEW HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

Determine if the building is a contributing historic building to the National Register of Historic Places or a local historic district. Efforts should be made to avoid negative effects on primary historic materials, elements and spaces when designing and installing accessibility projects. Secondary spaces, materials and elements and non-significant spaces usually can be modified without adverse effects to the historical significance and character of the property.



A handicap ramp example in Gloucester, Virginia that carefully works with the topography without negatively impacting the historic building.

ASSESS THE PROPERTY'S ACCESSIBILITY

To assess a historic building's barrier to accessibility on the exterior, study the property's parking, building entrances, slopes and grade changes, and doorway widths and weight. Once in the interior, study corridor/hall widths, locations of toilets and elevators and any other restrictions. Become familiar with accessibility provisions of the building code that is used by the community and with the Americans with Disability Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) requirements.

5. Facade Improvement Guidelines

EVALUATE ACCESSIBILITY OPTIONS WITHIN A PRESERVATION CONTEXT

Once the above steps have been taken, design solutions that provide the greatest amount of accessibility while minimizing negative effects on significant historic materials, finishes and elements. Accessibility priorities are suggested as follows:

1. Making the primary path and entrance accessible along with the main public spaces inside the building;
2. Providing access to goods, services, and programs;
3. Providing accessible restroom facilities; and,
4. Creating access to amenities and secondary spaces.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR HISTORIC COMMERCIAL FACADES

Since most older historic buildings were not designed to be accessible, they typically have steps, landings and thresholds that may be challenging for the disabled. By carefully regrading, adding a ramp, installing a lift, creating a new entrance and modifying doors, hardware and thresholds, solutions can be found.

INCORPORATING RAMPS

This solution is the most common for creating an accessible entrance and should be carefully located and designed to minimize impact on the entrance and its materials. Since most historic commercial facades have zero setback, the depth of the sidewalk and coordination with community public works is required. Rears of buildings, particularly if parking is available, can be another option.

INSTALLING WHEELCHAIR LIFTS

Again, for historic commercial downtown buildings, this would likely be a solution at a rear of a building if there is space.

RETROFITTING DOORS, HARDWARE & THRESHOLDS

While historic doors should not be replaced or entrances widened, modifications may be possible if these historic features have already been changed or replaced. One of the most convenient alterations is to install an automatic opener while retaining the historic door. Offset hinges can also provide a bit more space if the door width is limited

and they can be combined with an automatic opener. Thresholds can be replaced with new models that meet accessibility requirements or historically significant examples can have a bevel added to each side to reduce its height.



Changing hardware is a low-impact means to help create accessibility to historic buildings.



Many times a storefront entrance is already at grade, making accessibility feasible. However, other aspects of the entrance generally need to be verified and any changes should have minimal impact on existing historic materials or features.

6. Guidance for Public Spaces

GUIDANCE FOR PUBLIC SPACES

The publicly owned parts of downtown are as important as the private structures in helping define the unique character of the district. The following guidance encourages retaining such character-defining features for the downtown and expanding their use when the opportunity arises. See [Main Street Guidelines: Public Improvements on Main Street](#) for more background information on the public areas of historic downtowns.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

1. Reinforce the sense of arrival and place.
2. Support overall visual image and views.
3. Maintenance of elements and landscaping.
4. Connectivity reinforced by streets, sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting and landscaping



Street view of downtown Gloucester, Virginia



Alley improvement concept in South Boston, Virginia

PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

1. Existing parks should be maintained and well managed for daytime use, including landscaping, benches, trash receptacles and lighting.
2. Where new parks are being considered, ensure that they are near pedestrian traffic, are well planned for intended uses, such as concerts or other events, and well designed for maintenance and durability.
3. Do not demolish historic buildings to create open spaces and parks.



Public space improvement in downtown Winchester, Virginia

6. Guidance for Public Spaces

TREES AND PLANTINGS

1. Maintain the canopy effect of street trees on existing streets. Add new trees to fill-in gaps, to replace diseased trees, and to create a more contiguous canopy, particularly on streets where there is high tourist and pedestrian traffic.
2. Maintain existing landscaping, especially indigenous species. Plantings are especially appropriate in medians and curb strips.
3. Replace damaged or missing street trees with appropriate species. Use indigenous and hardy species that require minimal maintenance.



View of Davis Street in downtown Culpeper, Virginia.

4. Consider installing landscaping, including trees, in areas like parking lot edges, pedestrian oriented areas, and open spaces. Install site plantings so that they are protected from pedestrian and vehicular traffic, do not block views of storefronts, and meet necessary traffic-safety standards.

PEDESTRIAN WALKS AND CURBS

1. Retain historic paving materials such as brick sidewalks and granite curbs where they exist.
2. When sidewalks must be repaired, match adjacent materials in design, color, texture, and tooling. Avoid extensive variation in sidewalk and curb materials.
3. When sidewalks need replacement, consider using a paving unit such as brick or exposed concrete aggregate that relates to the scale of the district. Curbs likewise can be a material such as stone or exposed concrete aggregate. Avoid pouring concrete in continuous strips.



Sidewalk and crosswalk in Warrenton, Virginia.

4. Maintain a distinction between sidewalks and streets.
5. Avoid excessive curb cuts for vehicular access across pedestrian ways; where curb cuts are necessary, continue sidewalk material to create continuity in the district.
6. Change crosswalks to materials, such as brick pavers, to encourage safe pedestrian movement across street intersections.

6. Guidance for Public Spaces

PARKING AND PAVING

1. Screen parking lots from streets and sidewalks with trees and landscaping and include interior planting islands to provide shade and visual relief from large expanses of asphalt.
2. Install adequate lighting to provide security in evening hours.
3. Make street paving consistent throughout the district. Avoid the cosmetic patching of surfaces when more substantial repair is needed.



Landscaped parking lot in Emporia, Virginia.

STREET FURNITURE

1. Place benches at key locations in the district. Use traditional designs constructed of wood and/or cast iron.
2. Attempt to make any existing or future street furniture such as newspaper boxes, telephone booths, bicycle racks, drinking fountains, planters, and bollards compatible in design, color, and materials with existing elements.
3. Avoid placing too many elements on narrow sidewalks.



Street benches in Cumberland, MD

4. Choose an appropriate traditional design for any trash containers in the district, possibly matching other street furniture. Painted metal is generally more appropriate than wood, concrete, or plastic.

LIGHTING

1. Use pedestrian-scaled light fixtures where high tourist and pedestrian traffic currently exists or is anticipated.
2. Provide adequate lighting at critical areas of pedestrian/vehicular conflict such as parking lots, alleys, and crosswalks.
3. Keep to a minimum the number of styles of light fixtures and light sources used in the district.



Lighting on Main Street in Woodstock, Virginia.

TRAFFIC SIGNALS AND UTILITIES

1. Consider installing traffic signals on poles that are placed beside the street and are compatible with the pedestrian-scaled light fixtures.
2. Place utilities underground if possible or locate behind buildings. Screen surface equipment.
3. Place necessary utilities such as transformers and overhead wires so that they are as visually unobtrusive as possible.
4. Consider painting existing aluminum poles used for traffic signals and lighting to match the color of any new pedestrian street light poles.

6. Guidance for Public Spaces

ALLEYS

1. Improve alleys that run down the middle of blocks and accommodate vehicles. Where possible, add pedestrian amenities to access the rears of buildings.
2. Identify alleys between buildings that can be converted to enhanced pedestrian connections to other businesses, parking, or outdoor seating and dining for adjacent restaurants.



Alley improvement project in Winchester, Virginia before (above) and after (right).



Alley improvement project in Wytheville, Virginia

WAYFINDING SIGNS

(SEE VMS WAYFINDING SIGN TECH SHEET)



1. Create new gateway, directional, and information sign system for visitor traffic to the central business district.
2. Consider expanding banners to highlight various visitor attractions.



Custom gateway signs in Wytheville, Virginia

FOUNTAINS, SCULPTURE, AND PUBLIC ART

1. Consider installing local historical plaques commemorating significant events, buildings, and individuals in the downtown and community. These place-making elements play an important role in celebrating and communicating the history of the downtown.
2. Maintain existing fountains, sculpture, historical plaques and statues in the district and consider adding such elements in the design of any new open space in the historic downtown.



Staunton, VA



Lexington, VA

7. Guidance for New Construction & Additions

NEW CONSTRUCTION AND ADDITIONS DOWNTOWN

Many of Virginia's Main Street communities have local architectural review boards with adopted design guidelines that any proposed new projects and new building designs need to follow. The following are not prescriptive standards or regulations. Those requirements are found within the local zoning ordinance and the state building codes that local officials must follow. The following items provide guidance for communities that do not have local architectural review and can help determine whether a proposed new building design is appropriate and compatible. However, the degree of importance of each criterion may vary within each area as conditions vary.

CONTEXT

The context of a building refers to the external factors, or surrounding environment, that influence or impact the design of a building or site.

This context can be divided into the following parts:

- **The Public Realm:** This consists of the public street, any planted verge, and the public sidewalk. It may contain public plantings, street trees, public street furniture, utility structures and features, and sidewalk designs and materials. In a downtown area, it also includes buildings adjacent to, across the street from, and in the general area of the site. Building heights, scale, stories, openings, materials, and so forth, provide the context for new construction.
- **The Private Realm:** This refers to the building elements related to the overall context. The style, building type, size, massing, scale, opening patterns, elements, materials, colors, and roof form all make up the context of the building. The rear area of the site is also part of the private realm and generally is not visible from the public realm. It may contain, parking areas, outdoor spaces and features, accessory structures, and various appurtenances.



Existing downtown context example, Culpeper, VA

Any new building design and its site design should be carefully considered within the context of the above realms and this context should extend to both sides of the entire block in which the site is located.

Copying historic designs or features from other parts of the historic district outside of this immediate context may not be appropriate if the new design is going to be a good neighbor to its nearby properties. Likewise, if some of the properties within the subject block of the proposed new construction are not contributing historic buildings, their attributes should not be included in any analysis of the historic context.

7. Guidance for New Construction & Additions

SETBACK

Setback is the distance between the building wall and the property line or right-of-way boundary at the front of the lot. Relate the setback of any new construction and additions to the setback of the existing historic buildings in the immediate surroundings of the proposed new construction. NOTE: Typically, downtown commercial buildings have zero setback from the front property line. However, a downtown may also have other types of buildings such as courthouses or earlier historic structures, that are set back from the front property line. This is where analysis of the context is essential when planning a new building.



Staunton Historic District Guidelines

Diagram of downtown buildings with zero setback.

SPACING

Spacing refers to the side yard distances between buildings. Typically in downtown areas there is no side yard, creating the continuous Main Street blocks of retail establishments.



Staunton Historic District Guidelines

Diagram of downtown buildings with no side yard, creating a continuous block..

ORIENTATION

Orientation refers to the direction in which the front of the building faces. Typically, downtown commercial buildings are oriented to the street. Orient the primary elevation to the primary street if the building is to be constructed on a corner lot.



Staunton Historic District Guidelines

Diagram of typical downtown building orientation.

7. Guidance for New Construction & Additions

COMPLEXITY OF FORM AND MASSING

The overall massing of a building relates to the organization and relative size of the building sections or parts of a building in relationship to each other and other buildings on the street. A building's form, or mass, can be simple (a box) or complex (a combination of many boxes or projections and indentations). Typically, downtown commercial buildings are simple in overall massing but may have some elements that break down the scale.

Use forms for new construction that relate to the forms of the majority of surrounding buildings. For instance, if a majority of most buildings on both sides of the street have simple massing, do not introduce a new building with complex massing.



View of Clifton Forge, VA showing a rich variety of form and massing as well as architectural details and materials.

HEIGHT AND WIDTH

The actual size of a new building can either contribute to, or conflict with, the existing structures in a historic district. Height and width are two primary considerations for making new buildings fit within a historic district. The height and width of a new building should be compatible with neighboring historic buildings.

Lexington Historic District Guidelines



Staunton Historic District Guidelines



Sample diagrams of the variety of height and width found in historic downtowns.

7. Guidance for New Construction & Additions

BUILDING SCALE

Scale in architecture is the relationship of the human form to the building. Height and width are the beginnings of creating scale; however, other elements such as cornices, storefronts, windows, etc., further define scale. Scale is also the relationship of the building to buildings around it. Create human scale in historic downtowns by including functional elements typical to the historic context, such as storefronts. Dividing a larger building by creating bays within the façade, or by introducing different materials on different levels, are other ways to create human scale.

Staunton Historic District Guidelines



This illustrations shows how architectural elements and details bring buildings into relationship with the human scale.

DIRECTIONAL EXPRESSION

The relationship of the height and width of the front elevation of a building mass provides its directional expression. A building may be horizontal, vertical, or square in its proportions. Commercial buildings in a historic downtown may have a variety of proportions depending on their design, age, style and presence of any additions. This variety adds a richness to the commercial area so there may be more flexibility in the design of a new commercial structure but it should still respect the scale of surrounding existing historic buildings on both sides of the block in which it is being constructed.



Directional expression is another way to look at the character of a downtown.

7. Guidance for New Construction & Additions

ROOF FORM AND MATERIALS

The form of a roof is an important visual element in defining a building and, with its materials, helps create continuity and rhythm in the historic district. Typically, roof forms in historic downtowns are sloped behind a cornice. Some downtown commercial buildings may be older and have gable roofs. Use roof forms in the design of new buildings that relate to existing surrounding examples.



CORNICES

Commercial buildings typically have a cornice above the storefront and at the roof line. In general, use cornices in the design of a new building depending on its context and its design vocabulary.



DOOR AND WINDOW TYPES AND PATTERNS

The size, proportion, rhythms, pattern, and articulation of door and window openings helps to give a building its individual style and character. The ratio of solid wall to voids created by openings also gives a building its particular style. There is a variety of style and character of these openings within buildings on historic Main Streets. Studying these elements of doors and windows of existing buildings within the context of the proposed new design helps better define what might be appropriate treatments for a new building.

- Ensure that the rhythm of door and window elements on a primary elevation of a new building is compatible with the rhythm of the majority of existing buildings within the block and across the street as well.
- Relate window and door openings for new construction to the historic context in the following ways: The ratio of solids (walls) and voids (windows and doors), the rhythm and placement of window and door openings, the proportion of window and door openings (the ratio of width to height), and the general size of windows and doors. The traditional design of openings, for instance on windows and doors, is generally recessed on a masonry opening while the opening on a frame building is surrounded by raised trim.
- Use windows with true divided lights, or interior and exterior fixed muntins with internal spacers, to refer to traditional designs and match the style of the building. Avoid false muntins and internal removable grilles because they are not compatible with the historic character of the district.

7. Guidance for New Construction & Additions

STOREFRONTS

Storefronts are a key component of historic Main Street districts and should be an important element in new construction. When designing new storefronts or elements for storefronts, conform to the configuration and materials of traditional storefronts. Keep the ground levels of new retail commercial buildings at least 60 percent transparent up to a level of 10 feet if possible. Include doors in all storefronts to reinforce street-level vitality.



MATERIALS AND TEXTURES

There is a rich variety of materials used to construct the original buildings in historic downtowns including wood for trim, metal for cornices and some structural elements, brick for walls, stone for foundations. The variety of these materials helps to give a downtown its rich character and human scale.



In recent years, the building industry has developed various substitute materials that have a similar appearance to several of these historic materials. For various reasons including cost, maintenance, and quality of available original materials, substitute materials are being used more in historic districts, particularly for compatible new construction.

Use compatible traditional materials such as brick, stucco, stone, and wood for new construction. Avoid split-faced block, and any material, color, or texture that is in stark contrast to the context of the new construction. Some currently available composites are available in custom-formed lengths, such as urethane, while others, including cellular PVC, are dimensional mill-ready blanks. Use materials that have a painted finish, can receive paint coatings, and are designed to retain them.

7. Guidance for New Construction & Additions

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS AND DECORATIVE FEATURES

Historic downtown buildings have a very wide variety of applications of decoration. These elements are used to define eave and cornice lines of roofs, articulate areas of openings, and define the edge of a wall and foundation. Take cues from historic buildings on the appropriate use of details and decorative features to articulate the design of a new building's style and elements. Relate these elements to the overall vocabulary of the new design. Avoid pasting on historic details to simple new designs.

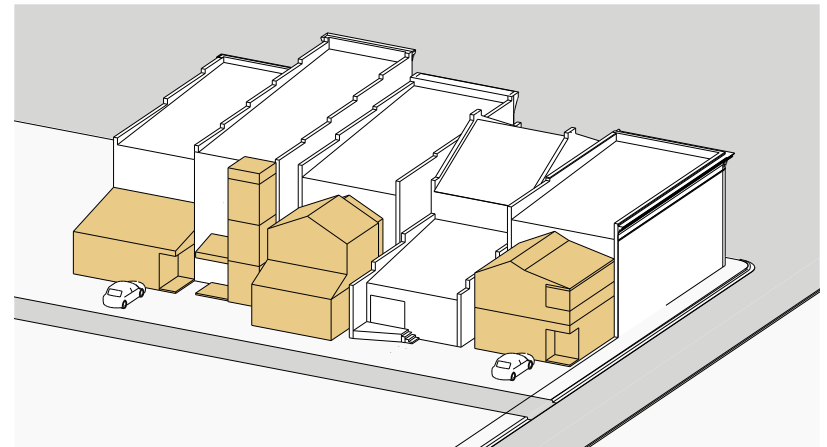


View in downtown Fredericksburg showing example of rich architectural details.

ADDITIONS

Additions to the existing historic buildings may be compatible with the design, scale, and architectural style of the original structure while still being differentiated from the historic building. In any case, the addition should be designed so that significant historic materials, features, and forms of the original building are maintained. There is no specific

formula for the design of an addition; it can be any architectural style – traditional, contemporary, or a simplified version of the historic building. Attempt to locate the addition on the rear elevation so that it is minimally visible from the street. Rear additions may also add functionality to the use of the building such as deliveries. Limit the size of the addition so that it does not visually overpower the existing building; it should be subordinate to the historic structure. Historic downtown buildings, because of relatively flat roofs, can have added rooftop spaces. Again, these should be located to the rear and not visible from the main street. Generally a rooftop addition should not be more than one story in height.



Note: If an owner intends to take advantage of the historic rehabilitation tax credits for the rehabilitation of an existing historic building, the design of any new addition will require design review at the state level even though the costs of the new addition cannot be calculated into the tax credits. While these guidelines follow the intent of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation Projects, interpretation of the standards by state review staff may differ from these guidelines.