Design guidelines

Design guidelines address aesthetic and environmental issues that business and property owners face in planning commercial and retail improvements. They are intended to provide ideas and guidance and promote good design among property owners, businesses, developers, and planning and zoning boards. Design guidelines address the physical aspects of supporting a healthy commercial area through storefront design and building maintenance. Setting standards ensure that development and redevelopment takes place in a way that is consistent with--and an improvement upon--the surrounding area has many benefits, including:

- Establishing principles to ensure that buildings that are sited, constructed and renovated in a way that is compatible in appearance and form with their surrounding. Improve the quality of physical alterations to commercial corridors
- Providing for attractive landscaping, buffers and transitions between uses
- Protecting and conserving neighborhood architectural character
- Enhancing economic investment for business and property owners
- Enhancing the quality of the pedestrian experience along a commercial corridor by providing a pleasant shopping experience for business patrons
- Protecting open space
- Minimizing the adverse effects of development

Part 1: Streetscape Facade

When it comes to people's perception of streetscapes and spaces, the truth is that looks do matter. A visually attractive streetscape is more likely to draw in tourists and shoppers, thereby stimulating the economy. A pleasing "village center" feel even along major commercial corridors can be achieved by creating a sense of unity and continuity throughout the neighborhood. The facades of buildings should relate to each other as much as possible in terms of design features such as architectural style, lighting style, building color, height, scale, and texture, patterns, opening shapes such as doorways and windows, and the style and/or color of signage. Too many varying building heights, color schemes, signs, lights, and awnings create a jumbled, chaotic appearance that is aesthetically uncomfortable to those passing through the area. Enacting design standards is a good way to strengthen and revitalize neighborhoods by making "Main Street" a *community* of businesses and homes rather than an assortment of stores in a row.

Paint Colors

To achieve the most attractive streetscape, color continuity should be strived for—varied colors within the same family. Pastels and neutral and "earth tones" are best, adding subtle character to each building while maintaining an overall consistency. This is not to imply that all buildings should be painted the same color—an identical, monochromatic façade detracts from the individual character of each establishment.

For individual buildings, the color scheme should ideally be limited to three colors, no more than five, including accents and trim, to avoid becoming overwhelming. Painting lines or designs on the building should generally be avoided.

These buildings reflect different elements of an earth-toned color scheme, unifying the street while still maintaining their own individual styles.

Example of the three-color scheme.

Texture

Deciding the proper textures for buildings is largely a matter of discretion. Specific design standards for the texture of building facades should be decided by the local Architectural Review Board. Given the diverse styles of different areas of the County, communities will be best served if acceptable textures are specified though municipal decision. However, we encourage adherence to a few basic guidelines.

- Maintain continuity. Putting a stucco building in the middle of an all brick street might look out of place. However, mixing textures can be interesting and appealing if done tastefully.
- Choose texture materials that will withstand weathering. These materials should be easily maintained and attractive from any distance.

Building height

When granting building height variances, Boards should use careful discretion and caution not to negatively impact the aesthetic quality of the neighborhood. Granting height variances allow a building to exceed its maximum number of stories should be avoided unless other buildings in the area have done the same. A four-story building in the middle of a two-story shopping district may look out of character with the area.
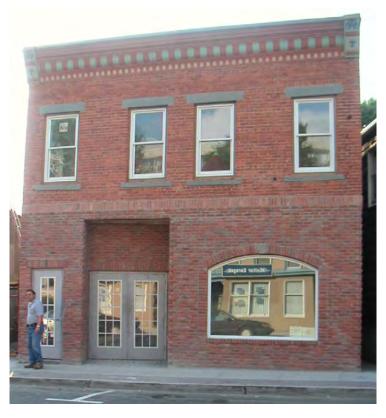
Architectural Features

Upper Façade and Cornice

Existing architectural elements around windows and cornices should be preserved, and historical features should be restored and accentuated.

New buildings do not have to look new. This remodeled storefront in Suffern is consistent with the village feel of the area. The unique stone cornice of the building has been accentuated with fresh paint. This building utilizes a 5-color scheme.

Doors

- Door style should be compatible with the overall façade of the building in terms of scale, shape, and material.

- Doors in retail and restaurant establishments should largely comprised of clear glass to display the building's interior and appear more inviting to customers. Avoid solid and opaque doors.
- Doors should not be blocked with signage such as to inhibit views into the establishment.

Windows
- Large windows with clear glass are encouraged to increase visibility into the establishment.
- Windows should be kept free of obstructions such as signs, banners, flyers, plantings, or merchandise. Windows should not be used for storage.

Storefront windows are simply decorated, leaving plenty of room for shoppers to get a clear view of what lies inside. The unlit, attractive sign is located directly on the building, causing no damage to the structure.

Overcrowded windows completely hide the inside of the store. Hanging banners and signs can cause damage to a building, and should generally be avoided

- Upper story windows should not be boarded up or closed off in any manner; this makes the building look abandoned or run-down.
- Display windows should avoid cluttering with too much merchandise, should not completely block views inside the store and should not be left empty or used as storage
- Where practicable, upper story windows may be considered for use as attractive displays.

ADA Access Ramps
- Railings should be of a material and style consistent with that of the building and surrounding area.
- Entrances should be kept clear of plants., merchandise, or signage
- Stores should cooperate to share ramps when possible.

Lighting

It is important that streets and stores be attractive at night as well as during the day. Lighting is a key tool for setting the atmosphere of an area. The types of lighting chosen to illuminate signs and roadways can be a tremendous benefit—or disservice—to a region.

- In order to maintain an appealing image, building lighting should be appropriate to the building's architectural style. Lighting should accentuate building elements, signs, and other distinctive features rather than attract attention to the light fixture itself.
- Ostentatious lighting such as neon tubing surrounding windows should be avoided.

- Flashing, moving, pulsating, or similar dynamic lighting poses a distraction and hazard to motorists, and should not be used. Similarly, lights that could be mistaken for traffic signals must not be used.
- Caution should be taken to limit the amount of glare impinging upon roadways and adjacent properties. Lighting should not be overly bright for the surroundings, and should never shine directly into the roadway. Provide indirect lighting wherever possible.
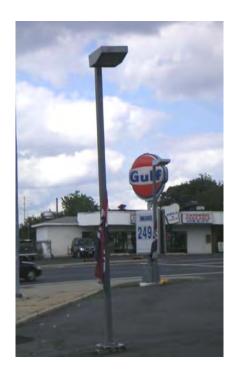

Lights such as this pose a danger to motorists by shining into the roadway.

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- The area of illumination should be focused on the sign or building itself, not the whole property.
- Gooseneck lighting is a versatile lighting style that is easily adoptable for a variety of storefronts and downtown areas. It provides a distinctive effect that works well on storefronts, light posts, and to illuminate signage. It helps to reduce glare by focusing light downward onto the desired area, while creating a charming atmosphere.

Awning lit by goose neck lighting.

These common lamps do nothing to improve the aesthetics of the street.

Streetlamps can be decorative as well as practical.

Signage

- Signs should communicate the name of the store and add interest and identity to the streetscape. Unique signs add a sense of place of the area.
- Signs should be consistent and appropriate in scale and style with other signs in the area, as well as the building façade itself. They must not cover or detract from any architectural features which define the character and line of the building.
- Fonts and colors should be legible. A general rule of thumb is 50 feet of viewing distance for each one-inch of capital letter height. Signs should not be overly large so as to "shout" beyond the distance necessary for viewing. Avoid long, complicated messages.
- Where possible, pedestrian-scaled signs should be used. Perpendicular signage, particularly wall-mounted flag signs, enhances the pedestrian qualities of the district as well as historic character. Signs should be no more than one story above the sidewalk level. The brackets of wall-mounted flag signs should reflect the style of the building façade.

- The use of distinctive lettering and interesting materials such as wood, stone, metal, or glass are encouraged.

- Free-standing poles with multiple signs on them are discouraged. Care should be taken to avoid cluttering too many signs in an area. An assortment of ugly signs destroy the viewshed down a commercial corridor.

- Flashing signs as well as internally lit "box signs" should be avoided.
- Signs must be able to withstand snow, wind, and inclement weather.
- Fasteners should be placed in such away that does not permanently alter building features, and should be concealed.
- The base surrounding free-standing pole signs should be attractively landscaped.
- Commercial signs are encouraged to be externally illuminated with appropriate lighting fixtures. A unique sign with insignificant lighting accomplishes nothing. The light source must be complimentary to the building façade, and all lighting conduit must be internal and not surface mounted. The same guidelines below for exterior building lighting apply to signs.

- Avoid attaching paper signs and banners to windows and doors. Hanging many signs creates a cluttered appearance, which should be avoided.
- Broken and obsolete signs should be removed. Rooftop signs and billboards should be eliminated.

Awnings

Used tastefully, awnings can be an enhancement to a streetscape. Take care, however, to ensure that the presence of awnings does not detract from the appearance of neighboring establishments. Their primary use should be to provide shade and weather protection. The awning style should be harmonious with the color, scale and architectural features of the building on which it is located.

- The installation of awnings must not damage the building and should avoid concealing or detracting from interesting building assets, such as intricate stonework, moldings, medallions, brackets, cornices, ornate door and window openings, and circular or curved windows.

- In order to avoid a mismatched, cluttered appearance, awnings on adjacent stores should maintain consistency in size, style and color, but need not be identical (see below).

- Awnings should be made out of soft materials, such as woven fabric and should be fire-retardant. Metal and shiny, high-gloss or translucent vinyl should be avoided.
- Awnings should accentuate the building, not become the focal point. Therefore, bright colors and busy patterns should be avoided, in favor of more muted colors and solid or striped patterning.
- Metal frames should be painted a dark color, or match the color of the awning.

This simple cloth awning enhances the building façade while providing easy-to-read, unobtrusive signage.

- Awnings should not cover more than one-third (1/3) of the vertical height a store window. They should be self-supported from the building and able to withstand snow and wind. While the use of retractable awnings is recommended, fixed awnings are acceptable as well.
- If a valance is included, it should be between four (4) and eight (8) inches long. Plain and scalloped designs tend to be best.
- Graphics and text located on the valence should be no more than 5 inches in size.
- Fixed awnings should provide a clearance of 7'6" between the sidewalk and the bottom of the valance; retractable awnings should provide a clearance of 7'0".

Design Spotlight: Chain Stores

Even chain businesses can make efforts to enhance a community streetscape. Chain retailers have used design guidelines to come up with creative ways to maintain their style and still blend in with the surrounding establishments.

Downtown Nyack is known for its quaint, historic, pedestrian friendly atmosphere. Enterprise has employed several good design features—a simple, easily readable flat sign on the building face is externally illuminated by decorative goose head lighting, which limits glare and adds character. The windows are large and accentuated with shutters. The single free-standing pole sign with goose head lighting matches the building, and is made of painted wood, adding an extra touch. The shutters, lights, and pole are painted Enterprise's signature green, making the facility easily recognizable, but not ostentatious.

The Wendy's in Airmont utilized a decorative cornice, bay windows with minimal window signage, a brick texture and attractive lighting and landscaping to making the fast food restaurant more compatible with its close proximity to residential areas.

Design Spotlight: Storefronts

Left: This hardware store illustrates good storefront design in many ways. The paint colors utilized have been limited to three, including the sign. The sign itself has an interesting shape, lies flat against the building, and is not internally illuminated. The number of signs hanging in the large, open windows has been kept to a minimum. The flowerboxes in front not only make the store itself memorable, but also enhance the entire street.

Right: This storefront could be enhanced by applying some good design practices. The windows of this store are so crowded with small signs and merchandise that it is nearly impossible to see inside. In addition, the store boasts a large internally-lit box sign on the roof. Storefronts cluttered with neon signs and advertisements should be discouraged.

Design Spotlight: Stripmalls

Hillmen Plaza in Airmont is an example of good retail façade design. While the storefront signs are able to express their individual character, they are unified by a common color and sign shape. Signs are indirectly illuminated from above to limit glare. The building features interesting architectural attributes such as shutters and decorative gables. (see below).

(Get a picture of a really bad one for comparison)

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Notes:

Encourage merchant and commercial building owners to clean up unsightly debris, fix deteriorating structures, painting buildings, and removing/scaling down commercial signing

Pictures:
Visually appealing/unappealing storefronts
Continuity of building style/ color; bad mix of styles and colors, building height?
Close-ups of good/ bad windows
Good/bad lighting
Awnings?
GOOD AND BAD SIGNS

Mixed use in "Main Street" areas. This building features retail on the first story, and housing on the second.
Where should this fit in?
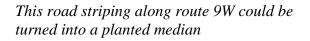
Part 2. Turning Paved Spaces into Green Spaces

A little green can go a long way. Even downtown retail areas and commercial corridors can become greenways if they provide street trees, landscaping, and other aesthetic enhancements to make the area a pleasing place to travel through. "Greening" developed areas is a worthwhile effort; as discussed in the previous section, attractively designed spaces are those people will choose to spend the most time—and often money—in. In addition to improving the overall quality of life, in many cases the economic ripple effects caused by community beautification projects are well worth the cost to a municipality.

Roadside plantings and planted islands increase the human scale and aesthetics of any thoroughfare, from residential street to major highway. Unused paved areas such as overly wide right-of-ways, concrete islands, medians, and striped areas can be redeveloped into pleasant green spaces populated with shade trees, shrubs, and flowers. The inclusion of a sidewalk can facilitate pedestrian traffic and create an attractive garden environment, even along major retail areas.

Planted medians and roadsides have other quality-of-life advantages as well. Paved surfaces reflect a large amount of harsh heat and increase the release of harmful gasses ad particulates into the air. Turning open paved spaces into green spaces alleviates hot, hazy highway and street environments by absorbing and retaining heat, providing shade, and improving the air quality. Vegetation reduces CO_2 levels in the air and acts as an air filter, as particulates collect on the leaves of the plants; it also aids in stormwater management. Plantings along roads also provides a habitat for birds and small wildlife of the area. Larger spaces can be turned into small parks, making the road more appealing to pedestrians, tourists, and subsequently businesses.

When planning green spaces within the right of way one must include curbs to protect the plantings from contaminated road runoff. Plant species selection is also important-- take care to avoid planting trees with wide-spreading shallow roots (they will cause pavement damage later on) or deep rooting vegetation in areas above underground utility lines and pipes.

This road striping along route 9W could be turned into a planted median

Similar to this one existing along Route 59.

Cracked, disintegrating, and overgrown parking lots are dangerous as well as unsightly. Parking lots devoid of trees and landscaping creates a barren, harsh, and hot environment.

Nicely planted islands in parking lots break up the "sea of asphalt" created by large retail establishments. Providing "green relief" in parking lots is not only more appealing to customers, it is better for the environment as well, serving as air pollution filters, shade on hot days, and drainage for storm water runoff.

Street Trees

The time and capital invested in the planting and maintenance of street trees has been found time and time again to be a winning investment that increases over time, possessing tremendous aesthetic, economic, cultural and environmental value. In many areas, street trees have been found to yield an amenity value of millions of dollars. Many local real estate agents believe street trees can contribute to the value of residential property by as much as 20 per cent. The Center for Urban Forest Research is a research laboratory at the University of California at Davis funded by the U.S. Forest Service. Their website (http://cufr.ucdavis.edu) provides an abundance of literature and case studies providing cost/benefit analyses, illustrating this effect. In addition to the benefits of green spaces discussed above, street trees provide a link between parks, open spaces, and waterfronts. In efforts to meet the five Greenway criteria, communities would be well-served to place a focus on street trees.

Street trees and wide, nicely landscaped setbacks add a more human, pedestrian-friendly scale to highly-trafficked commercial roads, mitigating the open, unnatural quality of large retail areas.

Street trees absorb stormwater runoff, lower energy costs by providing shade, help reduce air pollution and make any neighborhood a better place to work, shop, and live.

Care should be taken to provide ample room for growth and root spread. Decorative tree grates with "knock out" rings to allow tree growth should be considered along narrow sidewalks in order to protect the roots. Always avoid planning a monoculture of street trees—doing so leaves the area susceptible to annihilation from fungus and disease. In addition to reducing this, planting a variety of tree species along a corridor adds interesting shapes and colors, especially in fall. Appropriate clearance should be kept from the sidewalk to the lowest branches to avoid impeding pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Pick a tree species with an appropriate mature height and size for the area to be planted. Municipalities should consider adopting a tree ordinance similar to the model ordinance provided in Appendix **?** to ensure the proper planning and protection of trees along streets as and other public spaces.

A young street tree with a "knock out" tree grate. Note the colorful brick patterning on the wide sidewalk.

Part 3. Street Enhancement

It is often the details that will make your community stand out. In addition to eye-catching, well designed building facades and signage, amenities such as decorative brick and cobblestone sidewalks, hanging flower baskets on light posts, public sculpture and murals add character and charm, giving the area a sense of place. The object of implementing good design standards is not to homogenize every community, but provide municipalities with the knowledge and strategies needed to develop a creative way to make their own unique identity.

Sidewalks

A safe, solid sidewalk is integral to a good pedestrian experience. Sidewalks should be wide enough to accommodate at least three people. In areas of intense pedestrian traffic, wider sidewalks should be used to avoid congestion. Include access areas for wheelchairs and strollers. Landscaped strips and street trees can provide a buffer between the sidewalk and busy roads. Be sure to leave enough open space for street trees to collect rainwater. A minimum 4 foot by 4 foot area is recommended to avoid damaging trees.

The sidewalk surface should be even and well-paved at all time. Cracked and deteriorating sections should be replaced as soon as possible to avoid injury.

Crumbling, sunken, and mismatched sidewalks are not only dangerous to pedestrians, they are a sure way to deter potential shoppers and tourists.

      Sidewalks should be well lit with appropriate lighting to provide safe passage after dark. Please see the "Lighting" section for general lighting guidelines. Decorative paving materials such as brick, cobblestone, and flagstone are encouraged. Choose materials that can easily be replaces with matching bricks or stones, as damage and wear is bound to occur in some areas. Avoid using a variety of different sidewalk patterns, colors and materials along a street. A sidewalk should become a unifying design element throughout the region. The objective is visual continuity—using a number of mismatched paving treatments along a street creates a disorganized, piecemeal effect that fails to unite the streetscape.

Colorful brick patterns, planted islands and street trees make shopping downtown a more pleasant experience.

Sidewalks should provide places for people to interact. Where possible, open spaces and plazas or widened sidewalk corridors should be created for people to sit, stand, eat, and socialize. Quaint signs and storefronts is not enough—in order to truly revitalize a downtown, you make the community *feel* like a community. Designs should promote and facilitate people coming together. Public seating is often underemphasized—providing places to sit and rest makes pedestrian corridors, particularly "Main Street" retail districts, friendlier towards the elderly and people with young children. It provides people with a place to congregate. People may stay and shop longer if they are able to take a break.

The concept of public seating is a flexible one, which offers several customizable solutions. The first that typically comes to mind is benches. Decorative benches can be assets to a community, provided they are well designed. The best benches are comfortably proportional to the human body and large enough to seat several people at a comfortable distance from each other. Avoid cementing benches into the ground—this way they can be moved to better locations if need be. Ledges provide the simplest—and often best—option for public seating. Long, wide ledges seat a large number of people, and can be an integrated part of the street landscaping and architecture. Ledges give people freedom in where they want to sit. Wide plaza steps can also serve this purpose. The best ledges are no more than two feet in height, and wide enough to comfortable accommodate a person's behind. Ledges with back supports can be used, provided that the dimensions of the seat are not uncomfortable. The third seating option is chairs. Working best in plazas and parks, movable chairs give people the freedom to arrange their own sitting experience. They may be centered around tables, or stand alone.
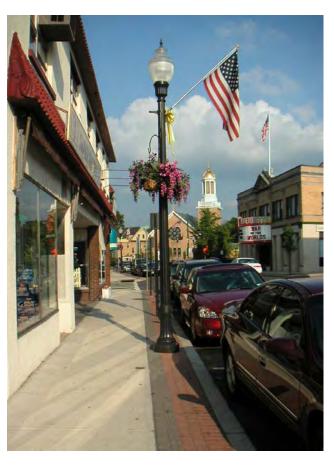
The placement of seating is often more important than the actual type of seating. Places to sit should be placed relatively frequently along a sidewalk corridor. Look at the existing conditions of the area, and observe where people tend to congregate, and open spaces where there appears to be a high level of pedestrian travel. These areas would probably be best served by pedestrian-friendly renovations. Sitting spaces should be attractive, and enhanced with landscaping. In plaza spaces, fountains and statues (which can also be used as seating) add interest and a sense of place. Parks and plazas should provide both sunny and shady sections.

Planters, Windowboxes and Hanging Baskets

Bright, cheerful plantings are a great way to enliven a streetscape, and helps to make the corridor seem more "green." Make sure that planters do not interfere with pedestrian traffic flow, and that baskets hang at a safe height, at least seven feet from the sidewalk. Choose annual plants appropriate to the light requirements existing at each basket or planter. Hardy plant species that are drought-tolerant are strongly recommended. While each planter does not have to be identical in color or plants chosen, chose colors and designs that compliment the streetscape and create continuity. While choosing plant species that drape over is encouraged to create elegant hanging baskets, make sure that the trails do not grow to such a length as to cause a nuisance. Make provisions to ensure that plantings get watered and maintained as necessary. Planting flowers only to let them die wastes time and capital, and dead, withered plants are no enhancement to a streetscape.

The charming street lamps, decorative brick patterns and colorful hanging flower baskets enhance the historic quality of these downtown areas.

Murals

Murals are a unique way to add beauty and community character. Murals should be large enough to be visible from the street. Windows should not be filled in or boarded up in order to

make the mural, rather the mural should work around the existing architecture. Murals which reflect a village theme or ones painted by groups or members of the community, especially children, are good ways to instill pride and public participation.

Guard Rails

Where practicable, decorative or unusual guide rails can be used in place of the standard metal guide. Stone walls and wood rails or posts can reinforce natural or historic themes present in the community, and helps them blend into natural surroundings.

While ensuring safety, stone walls and decorative guides can add quaintness to a roadside and even convey a theme.

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