

THE BENEFITS OF DESIGN REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

In 1935, Charleston, South Carolina, established the first historic preservation commission and provided for the review of all proposed construction work in the “Old and Historic District.” Today, almost 2,200 historic preservation commissions operate throughout the United States, and many of these include design review in their responsibilities. All share a common goal: To protect the historic resources of their communities. Many of these places have developed and use preservation ordinances and design guidelines in their review of proposed renovations and new construction. Design guidelines are important and provide the following:

- A basis for making decisions that are fair
- Consistency in design review
- Incentives for investment
- A tool for property value protection and enhancement
- A tool for education

In recent years, numerous communities have asked for more protection in their historic districts, with the result that more historic preservation commissions are designating more districts and developing guidelines for them. Many of these commissions are developing guidelines in greater detail than ever before, while others are experimenting with educational and incentive programs to encourage property owners to follow their design guidelines.

However, the challenge that faces most commissions is: How may one develop guidelines that will be fair and protect historic resources while also encouraging creative design solutions? Guidelines should focus on identifying the most important features of an historic district that should be respected, while refraining from dictating design outcomes.



Winter & Company developed design guidelines for the South Main Street Historic District in St. Charles, Missouri.

It is also important to distinguish between the “guidelines” themselves and the means by which compliance is promoted. In many cases, property owners must receive the approval of the local historic district commission prior to receiving a building permit. In others, however, commission comments are advisory only, or they are linked to an incentive grant. In each case, effective guidelines are essential because they help convey the design policies of the community in a manner that can facilitate appropriate design approaches.

This paper describes the concept of design guidelines, the benefits of using them in a design review framework and an overview of how some communities implement design guidelines.

WHAT ARE DESIGN GUIDELINES?

Local governments typically create preservation ordinances under local zoning regulations, within the framework of appropriate state enabling legislation. The courts have upheld this legal basis for design review, to the extent that they clearly have the right to adopt design review regulations as a part of historic preservation ordinances; they also have a responsibility to see that such powers are fairly and consistently administered.

Preservation ordinances and the design guidelines related to them thereby convey community policies about neighborhood design. As such, they provide a common basis for making decisions about work that may affect the appearance of individual properties or the overall character of a district. They also serve as an educational and planning tool for property owners and their design professionals who seek to make improvements that may affect historic resources.

Design guidelines typically address the following categories of work:

- **Rehabilitation and alterations to historic buildings:**

These may be individually designated historic structures or they may be properties designated as “contributing” in a locally defined historic district. Alterations to the exterior of a historic building, including construction of an addition, are subject to review.



Winter & Company developed design guidelines for the Old Town Historic District in Wichita, Kansas.

- **Alterations to “non-contributing” structures in historic districts:**

These are properties that may be old but have lost their integrity as historic structures, or they may be newer buildings that have not achieved historic significance. In general, the guidelines for new construction apply to these properties.

- **New building:**

Construction of new, freestanding structures, either as primary or secondary buildings within a locally designated historic district, are subject to review.

- **Site work:**

This includes new landscaping designs, the removal of original or historic landscaping and new grading and driveway construction affecting an individually designated landmark and for any property within a locally designated historic district.

National and Local Register designations

It is important to distinguish a city’s designation of historic districts through its local ordinance process from designation to the National Register. The National Register of Historic Places is a list of sites and properties of historic significance. Properties so listed may have national significance, but they may also be listed if they are determined to have significance at a state or local level.



Winter & Company developed design guidelines for the Northwest Quadrant Conservation District in Beaufort, South Carolina.

Properties listed in the National Register are also protected from federally-funded projects which might harm or alter the historic character. Such federal projects must be reviewed for their potential impact. Otherwise, alterations are not reviewed if the property owner is not seeking the federal income tax incentive or if no federal actions are involved.

By contrast, the local designation process is established through the police powers of the city's zoning ordinance. Criteria for designation are set forth in the city code and designated properties are subject to protections outlined in the ordinance, including demolition and design review.

A Typical Guideline

Each design guideline in this document typically has four components :

1. **Policy statement** - describes a desired state or condition of the design element being discussed.
2. **Design Guidelines Statement** - typically performance-oriented, describes a desired design treatment.
3. **Supplementary Information** - may include additional requirements, or may provide an expanded explanation. This information is listed in lower case letters.
4. **Illustrations** - may be provided to clarify the intent of the guideline.

WHY HAVE DESIGN REVIEW?

First and foremost, design review helps preserve historic districts as records of our heritage in a consistent and fair manner. The design guidelines used provide for unbiased and uniform reviews of proposed work in historic districts. They provide uniform standards by which all projects are evaluated. Design guidelines should not, however, dictate design by formula. Instead, they should identify key features of the historic resources that should be respected when planning any repairs, alterations or new construction.

Design guidelines also can establish a climate for investment for businesses, residents and property owners because the associated review process provides assurance that alterations and new construction by others will reinforce the preservation goals for the district. In a similar manner, where historic properties have been maintained, residents frequently adopt design guidelines to protect property values.

Design guidelines give local residents who wish to protect the distinct historic identity of the neighborhood a strong tool. They provide a framework for insuring compatible new construction that enhances, rather than undermines, a community's unique character.

Guidelines also may serve as educational tools, providing useful information about rehabilitation

All Projects


1 Awnings and Canopies

Historically, awnings and canopies have been a successful part of the South Main Street Historic District and their use is encouraged.

A.3 A horizontal, fixed canopy is permitted where historic evidence demonstrates that a canopy existed during the building's period of significance.

- Appropriate supporting mechanisms are wall-mounted brackets, chains and posts.

4



A horizontal, fixed canopy is permitted where evidence demonstrates that one existed during the building's period of significance.

A sample of the guideline format used for the South Main Street Historic District in Memphis, Tennessee.

procedures and design concepts that are appropriate. They often provide practical guidance, helping property owners make well-informed design decisions.

Benefits of historic preservation

Across the nation, thousands of communities promote historic preservation because doing so contributes to neighborhood livability and quality of life, minimizes negative impacts on the environment and yields economic rewards. Many property owners are also drawn to historic resources because the quality of construction is typically quite high and the buildings are readily adaptable to contemporary needs.

Construction quality

Most historic structures are of high quality construction. Lumber used came from mature trees and was properly seasoned and it typically was milled to “full dimensions” as well, which often yielded stronger framing. These structures also were thoughtfully detailed and the finishes of materials, including fixtures, wood floors and trim were generally of high quality, all features that owners today appreciate. By comparison, in today’s new construction, materials of such quality are rarely available and comparable detailing is very expensive. The high quality of construction in historic buildings is therefore a “value” for many people.

Adaptability

Owners also recognize that the floor plans of historic buildings easily accommodate comfortable life-styles and support a diversity of populations. Rooms are frequently large, permitting a variety of uses while

retaining the overall historic character of each structure and open space often exists on a lot to accommodate an addition, if needed.

Livability and quality of life

When groups of older buildings occur as a historic district, they create a street scene that is “pedestrian friendly,” which encourages walking and neighborly interaction. Mature trees and decorative architectural features also contribute to a sense of identity, an attribute that is rare and difficult to achieve in newer areas of a city. This physical sense of neighborhood can also reinforce desirable community social patterns and contribute to a sense of security.

Environmental benefits

Preserving a historic structure is also sound environmental conservation policy because “recycling” it saves energy and reduces the need for producing new construction materials. Three types of energy savings occur: First, energy is not consumed to demolish the existing building and dispose of the resulting debris. Second, energy is not used to create new building materials, transport them and assemble them on site. Finally, the “embodied” energy, that which was used to create the original building and its components, is preserved.

By “reusing” older materials as a historic building, pressure is also reduced to harvest new lumber and other materials that also may have negative effects on the environment of other locales where these materials are produced. Because older buildings are often more



Design guidelines for downtown Boulder, Colorado, directed the developer of this parking garage to provide a two-story commercial storefront which relates to the traditional downtown character.

energy-efficient than new construction, when properly used, heating and cooling needs are reduced as well.

Economic benefits

Historic resources are finite and cannot be replaced, making them precious commodities that many buyers seek. Therefore, preservation adds value to private property. Many studies across the nation document that, where historic districts are established, property values typically rise, or at least are stabilized. In this sense, designation of a historic district appears to help establish a climate for investment. Property owners within the district know that the time and money they spend on improving their properties will be matched with similar efforts on surrounding lots; these investments will not be undermined by inappropriate construction next door.

The condition of neighboring properties also affects the value of one's own property: People invest in a neighborhood as much as the individual structure itself and, in historic districts where investment is attracted, property owners recognize that each benefits from the commitment of their neighbors. An indication of the success of historic preservation is that the number of designated districts across the country has increased, due to local support, such that an estimated 1,000,000 properties, both as individual landmarks and in historic districts, are under local jurisdictions.

Preservation projects also contribute more to the local economy than do new building programs because each



Winter & Company developed design guidelines for the Napa Abajo/Fuller Park Historic District in Napa, California.

dollar spent on a preservation project has a higher percentage devoted to labor and to purchase of materials available locally. By contrast, new construction typically has a higher percentage of each dollar spent devoted to materials that are produced outside of the local economy and to special construction skills that may be imported as well. Therefore, when money is spent on rehabilitating a building, it has a higher "multiplier effect," keeping more money circulating in the local economy.

Rehabilitating a historic building also can cost less than constructing a new one. In fact, guidelines for the rehabilitation of historic structures typically promote cost-saving measures: They encourage smaller and simpler solutions, which in themselves provide savings. Preserving building elements that are in good repair is preferred, for example, rather than replacing them. This typically is less expensive. In some instances, appropriate restoration procedures *may* cost more than less sensitive treatments, however. In such cases, property owners are compensated for this extra effort, to some extent, in the added value that historic district designation provides.



Public participation is a vital component to any planning process, especially those directly related to a community member's quality of life. Here workshop participants in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, help Winter & Company identify those character-defining features which are important and should be preserved.

HOW ARE GUIDELINES USED?

Design review can be an advisory process, in which property owners voluntarily use the guidelines. In some cases, the property owner may appear voluntarily before the historic preservation commission to hear their comments, but compliance with their comments is purely voluntary.

Other communities require property owners to attend a design critique of their proposed actions, but compliance is not required. This system operates on the premise that well-informed property owners will "do the right thing," if they are informed.

Sometimes communities use the guidelines with special incentive programs that encourage investment in the historic district. For example, many Main Street programs offer low-interest rehabilitation loans to qualified property owners, on the condition that certain design guidelines are followed. In this case, the owner voluntarily enters into the program, but then compliance is required in order to receive the funds.

In the majority of situations, however, design review is mandated under a historic preservation ordinance, and property owners must participate in the review discussions and they must abide by the findings of the commission.

Each of these alternative uses requires personnel to administer them in various forms. The chart below summarizes the start-up and operating requirements of each of these applications of design guidelines.

It is important to distinguish the requirement of an owner to submit a design for review from the requirement to comply with design recommendations of a review board. Some systems require that owners submit their design for discussion and yet do not require approval of the review board as a step in receiving construction permits.

Each method requires start-up efforts, such as development of guidelines and operating procedures; administration is also required. The start-up costs and administrative effort generally increase as the degree of control increases over development.

Advocacy Program - Guidelines are promoted for voluntary use by a public service organization.

Advisory Process - Property owners are required to listen to a critique of their project, but are not required to comply with the recommendations.

Incentive Program - Special loans or grants are offered to owners who will comply with the guidelines.

Regulated District - Review and compliance are required by historic preservation ordinance, or in some cases by covenant.

ALTERNATIVE USES OF DESIGN GUIDELINES IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

| <u>FUNCTION</u> | <u>APPLICATION</u> | | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| | ADVOCACY PROGRAM | ADVISORY PROCESS | INCENTIVE PROGRAM | REGULATED DISTRICT |
| Review | Voluntary | Mandatory | Voluntary | Mandatory |
| Compliance | Voluntary | Voluntary | Mandatory | Mandatory |
| Staff Assistance | Useful | Needed | Required | Needed |
| Start-up Costs | Low | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate |
| System Maintenance | Useful | Useful | Needed | Required |
| Maintenance Costs | High | Moderate | High | Moderate |

CASE STUDY:
THE OLD TOWN FORT
COLLINS HISTORIC DISTRICT

Many architects have now engaged in successful projects within locally-designated historic districts. While they recognize that doing so may involve some limitation in the range of design choices available, they also acknowledge that design guidelines, when applied consistently and objectively, create a positive climate for investment. Numerous studies now demonstrate that local historic districts stabilize and often enhance property values. The Old Town Fort Collins Historic District is a dramatic example of such successes.

Old Town emerged in the 1880s as the Central Business District of Fort Collins, with its street grid oriented parallel to the Cache La Poudre River, and by 1900, it was the thriving focus of commerce for the community. It grew to include a mix of banks, hotels, retail stores, professional offices and apartments. The area continued to thrive until the 1930s, when College Avenue became the dominant business corridor. Then, in the 1960s, new strip commercial areas provided additional challenges. Over the years, Old Town declined, but many of its early buildings survived, although sometimes substantially altered. A few were demolished. Then, in 1979, the City of Fort Collins designated the area as a historic district and established a process to review alterations and new construction. Design guidelines were also developed that established the basic policies for review.

The guidelines asked that historic buildings be preserved, while accommodating new uses. When renovation was to occur, it was to be in a manner that maintained the character-defining features of the properties. New construction was to respect the historic context, but without literally imitating it.

Over the past fifteen years, more than \$50,000,000 in investment has occurred in the Old Town area. The Master Plan and Design guidelines helped establish a vision for the area and create a stable climate for this activity.



As investors came into Old Town Ft. Collins, they found structures in need of restoration. This row of buildings had lost some details over time and a monochromatic color scheme obscured the original design character.



Restoration work followed the Old Town Design Guidelines. In some cases, missing storefronts were reconstructed. In others, later uses were retained and designs were developed that enhanced the historic character while retaining future restoration options.



In the early 1980s, the windows in the Miller Block were boarded and architectural details needed repair.



The Miller Block was restored, following Winter's Old Town Design Guidelines. The plaza in the foreground is a part of the Old Town Master Plan.



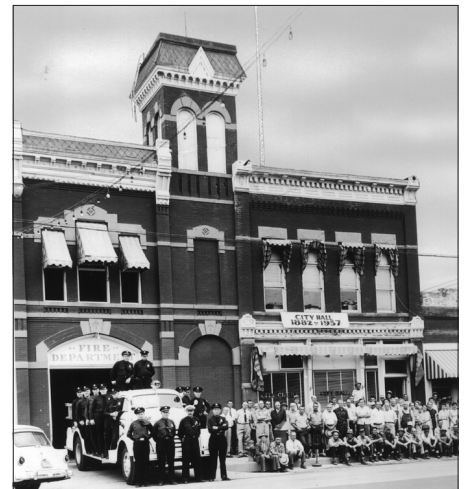
Winter assisted the property owner in developing a preservation approach that secured federal tax credits.



By the 1980s, the buildings had been severely altered. When sold as surplus property, a private investor sought to renovate the structures.

Individual investors were attracted to the area, purchasing buildings and restoring them. These early projects raised community consciousness of the potential for Old Town. Improvements continued into the mid-1980s, when larger development companies became interested and spearheaded a series of major projects, including several rehabilitation and new building projects. Cooperative programs with the city led to an improvement district that guided construction of a pedestrian mall and parking structure.

Each project was executed in a manner compatible with the previous ones, and thus the cumulative benefits of each investment has been shared by everyone, including property owners and the public in general. Today, the area exhibits a distinct identity that combines individual historic resources with contemporary infill into a harmonious whole that is rich with variety and detail.



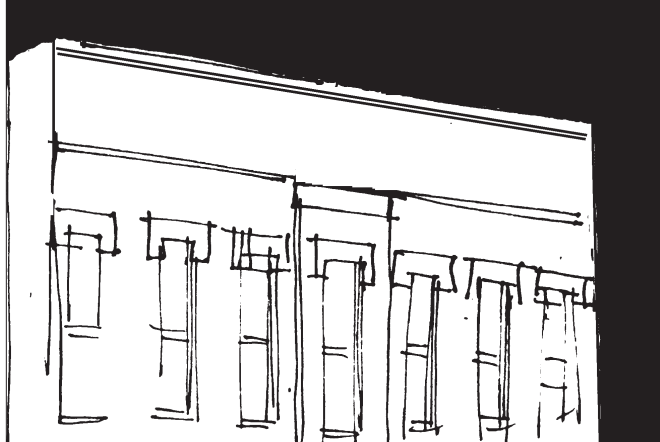
During the 1890s, the City of Ft. Collins housed its first department and administrative offices in this pair of Old Town structures.

The results speak for themselves. Old Town now is a lively neighborhood, with specialty retail, dining, entertainment and professional offices. A substantial economic generator in its own right, community leaders also acknowledge that Old Town helps in broader business recruitment strategies, because the quality of life that it represents is an attraction for many companies who may in fact locate elsewhere in the city.

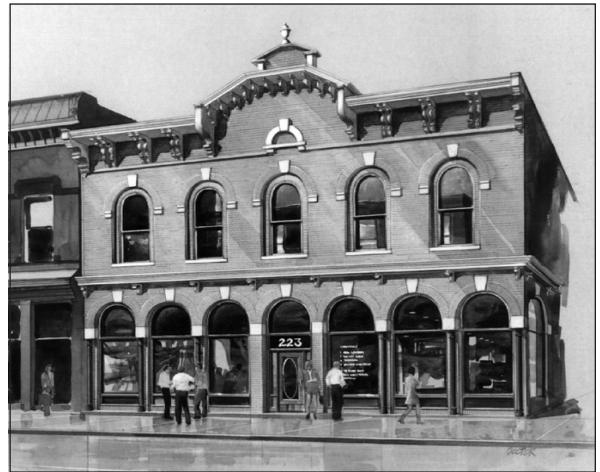
While many other factors have certainly contributed to the success of Old Town, the preservation program has helped create an asset for the community and it also has generated many jobs, including several architectural commissions! It demonstrates that the use of design guidelines can be a strategic tool in enhancing the built environment.



In 1982, The Reed & Dauth Building survived with upper story windows intact, but key ornamental features were missing or obscured.



The Old Town guidelines encourage reconstruction of missing elements, such as ornamental cornices.



Winter directed rehabilitation design sketches that illustrated the potential character of the Reed & Dauth Building.



After rehabilitation, the Reed & Dauth Building exhibits the distinctive cornice and arched ground floor that were a part of its history.

Winter & Company

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Services:

- Building Preservation
- Cultural and Recreational Planning
- Design Guidelines
- Design Review Systems
- Design Review Training
- Preservation Planning
- Streetscape Design
- Urban Design

Enhancing community livability, protecting cultural resources and providing delight in the urban experience - these are the focus of design services at Winter & Company - often in resort communities and other towns with special character. The firm consults nationwide to public agencies, non-profit organizations, and private property owners. Collaboration with regional planning and design professionals is a specialty of the firm.

Services include urban design plans, renovation feasibility studies, cultural plans and design guidelines. Projects span more than 150 communities in 45 states. Noré Winter, company president, is frequently a featured speaker at conferences and conventions, including the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Association of Home Builders, Inc., the Western Planners Association, the International City Managers Association, the American Planning Association and state-wide preservation organizations. The firm is based in Boulder, Colorado.