



**City of Hastings
Design Guidelines for Commercial Buildings
In the Downtown Overlay Zone**

**Adopted by the Hastings Planning Commission
November 7, 2005**

INTENT

The objective of these design guidelines is the protection of the historic character of the downtown buildings and the protection of the integrity of the current structures to prevent further damage. The following guidelines are intended to direct the physical and economic revitalization of the Downtown Overlay Zoning District and to insure a consistency in the quality of design for the downtown area.

These guidelines are not an attempt to provide specific solutions. They are offered as a means by which to effect beneficial change. As new technologies develop and other opportunities for improvements emerge, these guidelines should be periodically tested and reviewed.

The appearance of individual buildings, storefronts, signs, alleys, window displays, parking lots and sidewalks establishes the visual character of the downtown and plays a major part in the marketing success of the business district. Presenting an attractive image is simply good business. Improvement and maintenance is not only essential to strengthen the appeal of individual properties, it is also necessary to improve the image of the entire downtown area, an important public purpose.

New designs and alternatives should be compatible with existing buildings. This does not mean limiting that architectural variety of interest of the street, but rather that designs should respect existing buildings and strive for visual harmony with the character of the street.

The ultimate responsibility for the application of guidelines and their interpretation rests with the people who stand to receive the most substantial benefits from a revitalized downtown-the individual property owners and merchants.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

The design guidelines that follow contain a brief discussion of the importance of the elements being examined and a list of specific recommendations to carry out as well as construction and decorative measures to be avoided.

❖ **Section I – Front Façades**

The front façades of buildings are one of the most important physical components of downtown – economically, functionally, and aesthetically. Their physical condition plays a substantial role in the well being of any business community. Unfortunately, they all too often project a negative image when they consist of inappropriate siding, peeling paint, out-of-character signs and garish color schemes.

With proper design and maintenance, the building façades in a downtown present property owners and merchants with a rare opportunity. Many of these buildings, dating predominantly from the late 1800's and early 1900's, have visually interesting and historically important architecture. As a group, these façades have a distinctive ambience that is worth maintaining. Because of the era in which they were designed and built, they have basic warmth that is hard to duplicate today.

Most façades downtown are two stories high, with commercial space located at ground level and offices, storage, or residential space above. Visually, this arrangement divides the façade into two basic parts: the upper façade which is usually a flat masonry wall with regular spaced window openings and applied decoration; and the storefront, or lower façade, which is composed primarily of large display windows and the entry. Unfortunately, the storefronts have usually been changed drastically as they were “modernized.”

The end products of such modernization have frequently made the building not to scale and incompatible with the original façade design and materials remaining. Some building façades, on the other hand, have fared better and escaped inappropriate modernization. In this latter case, the original façade should be preserved and repaired with little or no alteration. Where the original façade is covered up, or no longer existent, any improvement should respect the documented historic character of the building as well as its neighboring buildings.

The design and maintenance of front facades consist of the following components:

■ **Storefronts**

Every traditional commercial building façade has a well-defined opening. Many of the problems with the storefronts today are that they no longer look like an integral part of the building; rather, they appear pasted on and do not reinforce the character of the entire façade. The traditional storefront usually had a recessed entry for the front door, flanked by display windows at the property line. This configuration accomplished two important things.

First, it located the display windows next to the sidewalk in full view of passersby. This allowed potential customers a full view of the merchandise on display and a view of the stores interior. Secondly, it emphasized the door and entryway. The intimacy of the enclosed and sheltered doorway provided a pleasant sense of inviting the customer inside.

Recommended Guidelines:

1. Storefronts should be designed to fit inside the original openings and not extend beyond it.

2. Storefronts should be designed with the largest possible window area, which is in keeping with the original opening. Emphasis should be placed on the display windows and doors that do not alter the original architectural character of the storefront.
3. Storefronts should respect the integrity of the building as a whole and relate to the building's original character. Storefronts should be compatible with the scale, materials, color and texture of the original building.
4. Where storefronts have been covered up with incompatible material, they should be renovated by removing the covering material. Avoid use of unpainted aluminum, imitation masonry, fake shutter and other incompatible materials in renovating storefronts.
5. Use simple and unobtrusive materials when renovating storefronts. Avoid garish patterns, textures or colors that are not appropriate to the character and functionality of the storefront.
6. Where the original storefront remains, it should be preserved and repaired with as little alteration as possible.
7. If restoration of the original storefront is undertaken, it should be based on accurate duplication of features substantiated by historical, physical or pictorial evidence.
8. Avoid introducing a storefront that significantly alters the original character of the building or the relationship of the building to the street.
9. Avoid the use of mirrored or tinted glass.
10. Avoid bare aluminum window frames. If existing aluminum frames are to be retained, they should be painted.

■ Upper Façades

From a distance, the image of the front façade is heavily influenced by its upper-story appearance. Typically, windows in the upper façades are positioned at regular intervals and act to establish a visual rhythm to the exterior design of the building. Their shape, size, placement and decorative trim constitute and contribute too many important aesthetic principles. The window openings, along with the material color and texture of the wall surface contribute to the overall visual character of the street.

Recommended Guidelines:

1. Screens, boards and other inappropriate materials covering façades and windows should be removed.
2. If the original window opening has been altered, restore them to their original configuration and detail. Avoid blocking window openings.

3. If possible, save and restore the original windows and frames. Replace missing, rotting or broken sashes, frames, mullion, etc. with similar material. Replacement windows should reflect the original design and material.
4. Where clear aluminum frames have previously replaced the traditional frames, they should be painted.
5. If a new interior ceiling must be dropped below the height of existing window openings, a recessed setback, or similar device, should be used to allow the full window opening be retained without alteration of exterior appearance.
6. If storm windows are used to improve thermal performance, they should resemble the existing window as closely as possible in shape, appearance, and color. Storm windows should be sized to fit the entire window opening.
7. Avoid storm windows that allow moisture to accumulate and damage the window frame.
8. Avoid through-wall or through-window heating/air conditional units.
9. Avoid mirrored or tinted glass. Replacement glass should be similar to the original.
10. Avoid the use of shutters except where clear evidence indicates their historic presence.
11. Avoid substituting one type of operable sash for another, i.e. do not replace Double Hung windows with Casement windows, etc.
12. Avoid storing material directly in front of windows. Wash upper story windows regularly and install curtains or other suitable devices to give a "lived-in" appearance if vacant.

■ Doors and Entries

Doors are one of the primary elements, which create individual character in the exterior appearance of a building. Historically, the storefront entry was more than just a door. Its design and appearance reflected its commercial importance. The storefront door was tall in proportion, built of wood and glass, and looked substantial, yet inviting to the customer.

The typical downtown building often has two additional doors: a second door on the front façade permitting access to the upper floors, and a rear door used both as a service and a customer entry. Compared to the storefront entry, these were traditionally modest in design.

Attractive entrances are essential, and customers or clients should be made to feel welcome as they approach the door.

Recommended Guidelines:

1. Original doors should be retained, repaired and refinished. Attractive hardware, such as brass door pulls and plates add visual value to the entrance and should be retained.
2. Where bare aluminum doors are to be retained, they should be painted.

3. Consider using subtle decorations on new and replacement doors. A handsome knob or pull or an attractive molding can make the door special and inviting.
4. Rear doors should reflect the character of the rear façade. Avoid a highly decorated door that would look out of place. If rear doors serve customers as well as delivery, they should incorporate glass panels of an appropriate design.
5. New doors should be compatible with the character of the façade. Avoid fake “historic” doors that are incompatible.
6. Avoid mirrored or tinted glass in doors. Avoid windowless wood or metal doors except for service and residential entries.
7. Avoid storm doors which are inappropriate in size, color, material and texture with the original door or which require replacement of the original door.

■ Awnings

Awnings are both visually and functionally appropriate for many commercial storefronts and upper façade windows. As a visual element, an awning can add character and interest to a façade. An awning on the storefront creates a pleasant space in front of the building, providing shade and shelter for customers and a resting place for pedestrians. Awnings on windows also reduce glare and serve as energy savers by controlling the amount of sunlight that penetrates the interior. The use of awnings downtown, with appropriate design, colors and materials, can provide attractive and functional additions to the building façades.

Signs on awnings can be viable solutions to providing identification for a business. Considering the cost as well as the life span of modern fabrics used for awnings, these signs can provide effective and long lasting advertising. Signs attached or incorporated into more permanent types of awning materials can also be effective communicators. (Refer to Section III City Sign Ordinance)

Recommended Guidelines:

1. Cloth or canvas awnings were traditional on most buildings downtown. Consider box awnings on the upper façade windows and slanted awnings of the storefronts. When canvas awnings are used on both upper and lower façades, they should be of compatible color, material and design.
2. The color of all awnings should complement the building. When a building contains more than one storefront, each with a different awning color, the colors should be related.
3. If signs are incorporated into an awning, the message should be simple and directed towards identification.
4. Avoid materials, colors and designs that detract from the character of the building.
5. Avoid stock, unpainted awnings, which are inappropriately related to the character of the building.
6. Signs on awnings should complement the building’s architecture and color scheme.

7. Signs on awnings should constitute a single area of the awning.
8. Signs on awnings should be located on the vertical portion of the awning for maximum visibility.

■ **Surface Cleaning and Paint Removal**

Cleaning the exterior façade is one way to bring new life to the appearance of a building. There are also functional reasons for cleaning, particularly masonry surfaces. Dirt on bricks or stone when combined with water will accelerate masonry deterioration. Cleaning should always be done in the least abrasive manner possible. Improper cleaning and paint removal can also result in the acceleration of the deterioration of the exterior material.

Recommended Guidelines:

1. Water or steam cleaning is usually the safest method by which to clean buildings. A low-pressure water (500 psi) or steam method, when accompanied by manual scrubbing and a mild cleanser, will cause the least damage.
2. Paint may be removed with water-soluble alkali and solvent based chemicals applied by brush and removed with medium water pressure or steam spray. A certain chemical reaction of paint removal on material surfaces before proceeding.
3. If a brick façade was originally painted, a soft brick was probably used in construction. These surfaces should remain painted.
4. Avoid cleaning or paint removal by blasting with sand, grit, chips, shells, beads, or other abrasive substances. Blasting will erode surfaces, remove details and may accelerate the complete deterioration of the surface.
5. Avoid using chemicals that adversely affect the building fabric.
6. Avoid wet cleaning when frost is expected.

❖ **Section II – Rear Façades**

The rear façades of buildings are often a neglected and forgotten resource downtown. The rear façades, especially along the alleys, offer too many buildings potential customer as well as service entries. By being able to enter directly from a parking lot, via an attractive entry, the customer is made to feel welcomed. The visibility of the rear façade from the alley often increases the need to revitalize these surfaces. Like the storefront, the rear entry requires identification and should be made attractive and inviting. This does not, however, imply an elaborate or expensive undertaking. Rather, since the rears of buildings are usually plain and unadorned, the revitalization can be undertaken in a simple, straightforward manner. In general, the same recommendations apply to the rear as to the front façades.

Recommended Guidelines:

1. Original doors or window openings that are not blocked should be reopened to their original dimensions and filled with appropriate doors or windows.
2. Compatible display windows should be installed to identify the business on or near the entry. Service entries should be clearly marked to avoid confusion.
3. An appropriate sign should be installed to identify the business on or near the entry. Service entries should be clearly marked to avoid confusion.
4. Recommendations established in other parts of the interpretations should be followed.

❖ Section III – City Sign Ordinance

See Section 90-961 of the Code of Ordinances City of Hastings Michigan.

❖ Section IV – New Buildings

Construction of new buildings on vacant lots downtown should be encouraged. New buildings and second floor additions should strive for excellence in design whether the project is a small, individual, infill construction within the existing downtown blocks, or larger, independently sited projects. Located within the context of an existing architectural setting, the design of new buildings and landscaping should respond positively to the physical character of the downtown. Since a good new design that responds positively to its surroundings can be done in a number of ways, it is not possible to develop specific interpretation that will apply in all cases. Every site has its own design opportunities. However, as a guide, the recommendations below should be followed.

Recommended Guidelines:

1. All façade improvements should be done in a way that protects the historic character of the downtown buildings and works to preserve the structural integrity of the building.
2. A new building's façade should not pretend to be historic by adding pseudo-Colonial, Victorian, Tudor or other period details in an attempt to blend with the existing environment. This "applied style" approach will only detract from the character of the downtown by compromising what is truly historic.
3. Most buildings downtown share a general similarity in height that should be respected by new buildings. Extreme differences in building heights will have a detrimental visual effect on the appearance of surrounding property.
4. A new building should reflect the existing rhythm, proportion, scale and massing of buildings in the area and their relationship to the site.
5. New buildings should respect the established setbacks and the spacing between buildings.

6. The form of the roof and cornice treatment of new buildings should respect the established context.
7. The rhythm, scale and proportion of openings in new buildings and their relationship to the wall surface in which they are located should respect the existing buildings.
8. A new building's façade should be composed of materials, textures and colors that complement adjacent façades.

New building details and decorations should relate to the details and decorations of the existing surround buildings.