

## **DDA Design Guidelines for Historic Downtown Commercial Rehabilitation**

### **Introduction**

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.

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

Downtown Rochester has evolved over decades, one building at a time; it is organic. A building does not necessarily have to be old to be a valued addition to downtown. Good design, which can exist in any period, will only serve to improve the image of the area.

The following guidelines deal mainly with design issues. However, since maintenance of improvements is vital to their lasting effect, these guidelines will also include some recommendations on that subject. The guidelines and their interpretations have been developed to enhance the individual character of each building strengthening the overall image of downtown. They do not, as with some towns, advocate a “theme” approach to improvements: such as “colonial” or “Bavarian”. A long-term, pleasing treatment, that is likely to survive passing fashions, can be gained by examining each building individually and taking advantage of its historic integrity. Such improvements are good, lasting investment both in terms of cost and customer relations. By coordinating improvements, individual merchants are able to retain their individual identities while strengthening the image of downtown as a whole.

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 owner and merchants.

## **Intent of the Guidelines**

Merchants, property owners and the staff of the DDA have developed the following guidelines. They reflect input from the Rochester community as well. Intended to guide the physical and economic revitalization of the DDA district, the interpretations will serve as a reference to insure a consistency in the quality of design for the downtown area. By following these guidelines, merchants and property owners will qualify for façade grant monies to be used for the improvements and for special tax benefits provided by the federal government. These guidelines and their interpretations do not 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, the interpretations of the guidelines should be periodically tested and reviewed.

The intent is to provide standards by which the DDA can determine whether to commit its funds to help finance historic improvements to existing buildings.

## **Use of the Interpretations**

These interpretations offer some basic, common sense advice to merchants, property owners and others involved in improving the downtown. Those wishing to take advantage of the special financial incentives provided by local, state and federal governments should use them.

The interpretations that follow contain a brief discussion of the importance of the elements being examined and a list of specific recommendations and procedures to be avoided. The interpretations are organized as follows:

- Section I - Front
- Section II - Rear Facades

Proposals presented to the Design Review Committee should also be evaluated by applying the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation where applicable.

## **Rehabilitation for Commercial Façade Grants**

Any downtown merchant or property owner who wishes to take advantage of this special Downtown Development Authority financial incentive must comply with the Guidelines for Rehabilitating Commercial Buildings. The DDA Director must approve in writing building plans prior to any construction. Loan funds will be dispersed upon completion of the project consistent with the approved plans.

## **Section I. - Front Facades**

The front facades 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 facades 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 a visually interesting and historically important architecture. As a group, these facades 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 facades downtown are two stories high, with commercial space located at ground level and offices, storage, or residential space above. Visually, this arrangement divides the facade into two basic parts: the upper facade which is usually a flat masonry wall with regular spaced window openings and applied decoration; and the storefront, or lower facade, 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 facade design and materials remaining. Some building facades, on the other hand, have fared better and escaped inappropriate modernization. In this latter case, the original facade should be preserved and repaired with little or no alteration. Where the original facade is covered up, or no longer existent, any improvement should respect the documented historic character of the building as well as its neighboring buildings.

### **Storefronts**

The lower facade of the building, the storefront, has usually been altered in the years since its original construction. The net result of these changes is normally an erosion of its original character.

Every traditional commercial building facade 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 facade. 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 store's 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.

## **Recommendations:**

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 historically incorrect "revival" architecture.
9. Avoid introducing a storefront that significantly alters the original character of the building or the relationship of the building to the street.
10. Avoid the use of mirrored or tinted glass.
11. Avoid bare aluminum window frames. If existing aluminum frames are to be retained, they should be painted.

## Upper Facades

From a distance, the image of the front facade is heavily influenced by its upper-story appearance. Typically, windows in the upper facades 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 to 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. (Also See the Section - Walls.)

### Recommendations:

1. Screens, boards and other inappropriate materials covering facades 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. Replacements 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 conditioning 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 facade 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.

### **Recommendations:**

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 facade. 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.

## **Walls**

The texture and color of brick and limestone walls are among the most dominant visual features in the downtown area. They are an integral part of the visual character of downtown, and as such, should be restored and enhanced by uncovering, maintaining and preserving them in the appropriate manner.

Many of the original walls, whether masonry or ornamental carrara glass, have been covered up with aluminum, fake rock, plastic or scarred and obscured with large, not to scale signs. The end result of such modernizations is building walls that are out of character with other details of the building and with the downtown as a whole. In addition, these modernizations have tended to homogenize the downtown so that the historic and architectural individuality of the buildings is obscured.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Original building wall material should not be covered with any form of inappropriate siding. Where this has already occurred, the inappropriate siding should be removed and the original wall material restored.
2. Wall surfaces that have not been painted should remain unpainted.
3. Damaged walls should be repaired or replaced with material that duplicates the original as closely as possible. See Secretary of the Interior - Standard on mortar mix.
4. Avoid scarring walls with holes for attaching signs, etc.
5. Avoid removing wall materials and features that are essential parts of the building's character.

## **Building Detail, Decoration and Cornice**

One of the most striking aspects of the traditional building facade is its appealing detail. Many of the buildings downtown offer a blend of architecture and sculpture, craftsmanship and materials that would be difficult and expensive to produce today. Architectural decoration and detail help make downtown special. This is an asset and should be taken advantage of.

Many materials are used in decoration and detailing, for example:

- 1) **Masonry** – Decorative masonry includes both brick and stonework ranging from beautifully detailed cornices and arched window heads to storefront piers.
- 2) **Terra Cotta** – Decorative terra cotta was commonly used from the 1880's to the 1930's, most commonly as a veneer or as masonry unit in combination with brick or stone.

- 3) **Cast Iron and Sheet Metal** – Usually found in buildings constructed before 1900, cast iron and sheet metal were used for cornices, windows surrounds or entire facades.
- 4) **Wood** – Wood details are often subtle, as the moldings around windows, and are important in creating the total facade effect.
- 5) **Decorative Glass**- Beveled, leaded, etched, carrara and spandrel glass are all forms of decorative glass used in the building's downtown.

One of the strongest visual elements on a facade is the continuous molded or projecting cornice. It not only protects the facade from the elements, it also provides a strong visual cap or termination to the vertical composition of the facade. The cornice is often decorated with fine details that give scale to the building. As a major design element, cornices should be retained, repaired or replaced. *It cannot be too strongly emphasized that most downtown buildings need a cornice to be architecturally complete.*

### **Recommendations:**

1. Deteriorated details, decorations and cornices should be repaired rather than replaced whenever possible. In the event replacement is necessary, the new material should match the original material in compositions, design, color and texture. Repair or replacement of missing architectural decorations and details should be based on accurate duplications, substantiated by historical, physical or pictorial evidence rather than on conjectural design.
2. Heavy or numerous coats of paint that obscure architectural decorations and details should be removed before repainting.
3. Sagging details, decorations and cornices should be firmly re-anchored.
4. When replacing or repairing masonry details, decorations or cornices, care should be take to prevent an obvious and unsightly patch. Materials, joints, etc. should match the original as closely as possible in compositions, color and texture.
5. Corbelling should be retained and restored whenever possible.
6. Care should be exercised whenever dealing with terra cotta for replacement. Repair is difficult. Repair cracked or chipped glazed surfaces as closely as possible.
7. Metal and cast iron that has signs of corrosion, tears, holes or missing pieces should be repaired or replaced as closely as possible to the original.
8. Soft, dry or split areas in wood surfaces should be filled, caulked, primed and painted or stained to match the original.



9. Replacement glass should resemble the original as closely as possible.
10. Where the original cornice has been removed or altered, it should be replaced or restored with a duplication of the original. Where this is not possible, a simplified version of the original should be designed.
11. Avoid unnecessary changes in cornice height.
12. Avoid fake ‘historic’ details, decorations and cornices.

## **Painting Schemes and Color Palette**

Painting can be one of the most dramatic and least expensive improvements to a building. Painting at regular interval is also an essential part of maintenance and upkeep. This protects vulnerable wood surfaces from deterioration. Painting is also a practical way to visually tie together individual building facades in the downtown area. Attention should be given not only to selection of appropriate colors but also to the preparation of the surfaces, choice of paint type (oil or latex base) and finish (gloss, semi-gloss or matte).

### **Recommendations:**

1. Color applied to side and rear walls should avoid harsh shifts from that on front walls. A building should be treated as visually consistent on all sides.
2. When repainting, consider using the original painting scheme and color palette.
3. Color should be used to tie building elements, such as details, decorations, cornices, signs and storefronts, together. This is usually most successful when a maximum of three colors is used.
4. The color palette should be consistent throughout both the upper and lower portions of the building’s front facade.
5. Color palettes and paint schemes on adjoining buildings should be compatible.
6. The color used on the cornice should offset the color of the sky.
7. Normally, the previous paint type (oil or latex base) should be used in repainting. Generally, use oil base for wood and latex base paint for masonry.
8. Avoid the use of bright primary colors and very dark colors that are usually incompatible with the building’s downtown. Bright colors and very dark colors are also highly susceptible to fading.

## **Awnings**

Awnings are both visually and functionally appropriate for many commercial storefronts and upper facade windows. As a visual element, an awning can add character and interest to a facade. 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 facades.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Cloth or canvas awnings were traditional on most buildings downtown. Consider box awnings on the upper facade windows and slanted awnings of the storefronts. When canvas awnings are used on both upper and lower facades, 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.

## **Surface Cleaning and Paint Removal**

Cleaning the exterior facade 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.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Water or steam cleaning is usually the safest method by which to clean buildings. A low-pressure water (500psi) 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 facade 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 Facades**

The rear facades of buildings are often a neglected and forgotten resource downtown. The rear facades, especially along the alleys, offer to 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 facade from the alley DDA 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 facades.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Original doors or window opening that are now blocked should be reopened to their original dimensions and filled with appropriate doors or windows.
2. Compatible display windows should be provided at ground level.
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.