



Streetscape Guidance for Downtown Historic Districts

Developed with the Michigan Department of Transportation

Introduction

When streetscape improvement projects receive federal funding, federal agencies or their delegates must consult with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires consideration of the potential effects of a project on historic properties, which are those that are listed – or eligible to be listed – in the National Register of Historic Places. If your project area includes historic properties, either currently or in a future phase, continued close coordination with the SHPO regarding the design of your project will be a key element for success. Successful projects design solutions to preserve the historic character of the individual communities, preserving significant elements and introducing new features that are compatible with the historic character of a community.

General Comments:

1. **The individual buildings that make up a historic district are significant for their architectural detail and connection to a community's heritage.** When federal funds are used for any part of a project within a historic district, federal rules and regulations must be followed. All streetscapes, including every element no matter the funding source, must not have an adverse effect on the district (i.e. do not harm the overall character of the area) and must comply with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*.
2. **The Design and Review Process.** As a first step when planning a streetscape, find whatever historic photographs you can of the downtown area. These photographs will be the key to designing an appropriate streetscape and preserving the character and integrity of the area. Most historic commercial areas have been photographed through time. Paving materials, lights (or the lack of lights), signs, street furniture and more are frequently revealed in historic photographs. Other sources for historic documentation are Sanborn fire insurance maps or older aerial photographs. Local libraries and historical societies are a good place to start the search for historic documentation. Identify the elements that were present in the past and look to those for design guidance. For elements that were not present in the past, choose modern, simple designs. Consult the SHPO early in the design process to review these guidelines and discuss specific issues in your district. Early and consistent consultation is the most effective way to assist the SHPO in providing a smooth and efficient review. Designs may need to be revised in order to comply with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*; please do not wait until the construction documents are completed, or the work is ready to commence, to involve the SHPO.
3. **Streetscape design in historic districts should be simple.** The stars of historic districts are the buildings and businesses themselves, and thus a cluttered and busy streetscape can distract, overwhelm, obscure architectural details, and/or create a false sense of history, thereby harming the district as a whole. Extravagant streetscaping, unless historically documented, is never appropriate. The streetscape is a sum of the parts. Generally speaking, it is not any one particular element that by itself can cause an adverse effect, but the sum of multiple elements that affect context and can diminish historic character.
4. **Themed streetscapes, again unless historically documented, are also not appropriate for historic districts.** For example, a maritime or nautical theme in a historic district that uses anchors, compasses, ship's wheels, seagulls, driftwood, sails, bright blue streetlights, etc. would not accurately reflect the history of that district. Themed downtowns were not part of the typical design vocabulary in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.
5. **Streetscape design should reflect the unique (and documented) history of your community.** Existing historic elements should be repaired whenever possible. Replacement elements should be based on documented historic elements. Removing existing elements to make way for a sanitized and stereotypical version of a historic downtown can lead your historic commercial area to look like every other community and cause it to lose its individuality. Using elements that are present in

another community, but never existed in your downtown, will promote a false sense of development and weaken your sense of authenticity.

6. **Citywide Streetscape Plans.** Most cities have districts that differentiate themselves from adjacent areas by variations in the streetscape. Often commercial districts have different needs and different appearances than residential districts. Even though these streetscapes may differ from adjacent areas, they can be compatible and continuity may be achieved through the use of common elements (e.g., the same modern benches or trash cans) while other elements (e.g., the streetlights and historical elements) are unique to each district. What is appropriate for one district may not be appropriate for another. Keep this in mind when planning projects that may be expanded into other areas in the future. Also be aware that the scale of streetscapes in commercial versus residential areas is usually quite different. For example, wide sidewalks, while common and practical in downtown areas, are usually not appropriate in residential neighborhoods.
7. Please note that even if your downtown is not a National Register-eligible historic district, there may be individually eligible buildings that require special consideration when designing the streetscape. Many of the guidelines below will apply to the streetscape treatment in front of these individual buildings. Each individual building and its relationship to the streetscape will need to be reviewed in context and on a case-by-case basis.

Street Treatments:

Pavement Materials and Design—Historic paving materials should be documented before paving choices are made. Special existing paving features or decorative details should be retained. Contemporary decorative paving materials should be avoided if they are incompatible in color or design with existing buildings.

Crosswalks—Delineated pedestrian crosswalks are acceptable, although the use of faux historic paving materials to make the crosswalk look “old” is not appropriate.

Street or Intersection Treatment—Decorative pavement treatment at intersections or on the street itself (with the exception of delineated crosswalks) is not appropriate.

Medians—Medians are never appropriate in historic districts unless their existence can be documented with historic photographic evidence.

Sidewalk Treatments:

Pavement Materials and Design—Plain concrete sidewalks are strongly encouraged unless historic photographs document another material was used. Please note that most downtowns began with dirt roads and perhaps wood sidewalks. Concrete sidewalks almost always replaced wood and dirt paths. Therefore, unless photographic documentation exists, brick or stone (or stamping to look like brick or stone) sidewalks are not appropriate. Unless documentation shows historic brick sidewalks, the introduction of brick or modern pavers to sidewalks is discouraged as it can create a false sense of historical development of the community. Avoid pavers that are brightly colored, multicolored, or placed in decorative patterns because they can distract from the historic character of a commercial district. A small border or small area of accent paving, used in very limited quantity, may be acceptable.

Bump-outs—Bump-outs have only been in use for the past several decades. Although bump-outs have no historic basis, they do improve pedestrian safety. If not carefully planned, these new elements can dramatically change the character of a historic district. They may be acceptable if their overall treatment is simple, only low plantings are used (no trees), standard curb is used for the entire perimeter (except for ADA-compliant ramps), and decorative pavement is very limited.

Specific Streetscape Elements:

Streetlights—Use historic photographs to discover if streetlights were located in your downtown through the years (cobra head lights, which may have been installed as early as the 1960s, are not historic streetlights). If photographs illustrate your downtown did have streetlights historically, you **must** choose a streetlight that closely matches lighting in the historic photographs. A community may have had multiple

light styles in the early twentieth century, so simply choose one style. You **must** provide a copy of the photo documentation as part of your Section 106 submittal.

If photographs demonstrate that your community never had historic streetlights, you **must** choose a streetlight that is modern/contemporary in style. Do not choose a “historic” streetlight that creates a false sense of history or introduce historic designs from other locations. Contemporary street lights should be compatible in scale and color with existing architectural and landscape features. For all streetlights, choose a dark neutral color unless you have documentation of a lighter color

Traffic Signal Poles—Traffic signal poles, including strain poles, independent crossing signal poles and crossing signal activator bollards need to be kept to a minimum. Wherever possible, colocation of traffic signals, crosswalk signals, crosswalk actuators, etc., is strongly recommended. The use of cable-supported traffic signals is always preferred over the use of signal support arms.

Trees—Trees were almost never located in a downtown historically. Trees and vegetation were primarily planted on residential, not commercial, streets. In commercial districts, awnings and canopies were historically the most common method of providing shaded sidewalks. New plantings reduce visibility to business’s storefronts and signs, block potential awnings and canopies, and block street lighting. It is recommended that trees be used on side streets with no or limited storefronts, or in specific spaces such as pocket parks, vacant lots, parking lots, and blocks with non-historic buildings. However, if trees are desired, they may be approved if they meet all the following criteria and are chosen in consultation with the SHPO:

1. Non-canopy
2. Small in size when fully grown
3. Semi-transparent
4. Moderate-growth
5. Non-fruiting
6. Multiple species are used
7. Placement does not obscure significant buildings

Tree grates and guards—Flat tree grates level with the sidewalk are acceptable. Tree guards are only acceptable where historic photographic documentation demonstrates that they existed within the period of significance for the district.

Planters—Simple, modern/contemporary-style **moveable** planters are strongly encouraged. Fixed raised planters under 18 inches in height may occasionally be acceptable only if used in very small quantities.

Street furniture (Benches and Trash Receptacles)—Identify and protect historic street signs and other historic street furniture and preserve them in their original locations. Additional street furniture should be based on local historic design if examples or photographic documentation exist; otherwise simple, modern/contemporary-style must be used. Dark neutral colors should be used and the scale of contemporary street furniture must be compatible with existing architectural and landscape features. Limit the quantity of street furniture and place it appropriately. Street furniture should only be used if the sidewalks are wide enough to accommodate them and should not obscure pedestrian paths or existing architectural features.

Bike Racks—Simple, modern/contemporary-style bike racks must be used. Limit the quantity placed in the primary right-of-way. Where large numbers of racks may be necessary based on realistic anticipated usage rates, bike courts should be located on secondary or rear elevations and screened to limit their visual impact on the character of the property and the district.

Interpretive Signage—The SHPO must be involved in the development and placement of interpretive signage. A professional historian and a professional designer must be hired for all signage development.

Bollards—The use of bollards is strongly discouraged. Bollards may be considered only if a legitimate safety concern can be demonstrated and a strong benefit proven. In the rare cases they are used, bollards must be simple, modern/contemporary in design, and extremely limited in quantity.

Pillars and Fencing—The use of pillars and/or fencing is strongly discouraged unless their existence can be documented with historic photographic evidence. Pillars and/or fencing may be considered only if a

legitimate safety concern can be demonstrated and a strong benefit proven. Pillars and fencing must be simple, modern/contemporary in design, extremely limited in quantity, and in scale with the surroundings.

Arches—Arches are not appropriate in historic districts unless their existence can be documented with historic photographic evidence. Please note that some communities may have photographs showing temporary arches for use during celebrations, festivals, etc. These temporary arches were never permanent and cannot be used as evidence to support a new arch.

Kiosks—Kiosks should be extremely limited in number, dark and neutral in color, a maximum of six feet high (human in scale), very simple, and modern/contemporary in design.

Drinking Fountains—Simple, modern/contemporary-style drinking fountains must be used unless historic photographic documentation of drinking fountains exists.

Public Art—The SHPO must be involved in the development and placement of public art projects. Public art needs to be appropriate in scale to the downtown and placed so that it does not diminish the historic character of the associated properties or the district. Historic public art should be preserved on its original site. Public art should be subject to broad review and consensus, should represent high standards of design and execution, and should consider issues of maintenance and longevity.

Clocks—Clocks are not appropriate in historic districts unless their existence can be documented with historic photographic evidence.

Rain Gardens—While rain gardens did not exist historically in downtowns, they are becoming more common in the present. Care should be given to the design and location of any rain gardens. Any rain gardens should be appropriate in scale to the downtown, placed so that they do not diminish the historic character of the associated properties or the district, and designed to be as simple as possible (for example, using plain, low concrete curb). See above for discussion of the acceptable types of trees in downtowns.

ADA—Care must be taken when complying with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements so that buildings are not damaged in the process. ADA compliance that results in significant grade changes at the faces of buildings, the removal and/or addition of stairs, new ramp systems, new pedestrian railings, the removal and/or addition of retaining walls, etc. can negatively alter the character of a historic district. There is a process in place to deal with conflicts between ADA compliance and preserving historic character and features. Please coordinate with the SHPO early in the design process, and be aware that designs may require revisions in order to comply with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation while providing the best possible ADA compliance.

Roundabouts—Roundabouts rarely have historic basis and are strongly discouraged. If not carefully planned, this new element can dramatically change the character of a historic district. Roundabouts may be considered only if a legitimate safety concern can be demonstrated and a strong benefit proven. In the rare case they are acceptable, roundabouts must be simple and should respect the surrounding context. Careful coordination with the SHPO early in the project planning phase is highly recommended.

Conclusion

Providing a safe and pleasant streetscape in your downtown is important but does not require the loss of historic integrity. Streetscape modifications can be accomplished while being sensitive to local historic resources. Early and consistent consultation is the most effective way to assist the SHPO in providing a smooth and efficient review. Designs may need to be revised in order to comply with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*; please do not wait until the construction documents are completed, or the work is ready to commence, to involve the SHPO. This guidance is obviously focused on historic resources, but please keep in mind a successful streetscape project will also need to address many other factors like stakeholder engagement, pedestrian safety and mobility, maintaining adequate sight distance, compliance with American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) guidance when applicable, vehicular traffic flow, parking, appropriate plantings, overall maintenance, etc.