2.0 Design Principles for Successful Downtowns

No zoning code or design guideline can cover all possible development scenarios. These design principles should guide decision-making regarding appropriate development.

2.1 Urban Design Principles

1. **Establish and maintain a unified, improved identity for the downtown.** The work completed in the Master Plan and the design guidelines builds on the existing historic character of the downtown area. Future public and private projects should strive to harmonize with that character.

2. **The downtown should be the civic, cultural, and activity center of the entire community.** In commercial areas, a sense of architectural enclosure, seating areas, areas of shade and sun, attractive streetscapes, cafes, and a richness of experience in the public environment should be the goal. This can only be accomplished through coordinated public and private efforts. The Town Center character should be expressed through such elements as pedestrian connection of buildings to parking and the street, landscaping and screening of parking areas, abundant street trees, and enclosure of the street through similar building heights and setbacks along with landscaping. In residential areas, the provision of front yards, porches and porticos, set-back sidewalks and street trees, similar materials and the context-sensitive use of a "family" of designs for new buildings will help to establish a traditional neighborhood character.

East Bay Street in Charleston is a good example of a mixed use district. Retail, restaurants, offices, residences and inns all reinforce each other and extend the cycle of activity into the evening. See # 3.

3. **Encourage mixed uses downtown.** The success of a downtown is dependent on a mix of uses including office, retail, restaurant, civic, and residential. Mixed uses help ensure activity and security at all times of the day and evening and reinforce commercial uses by extending the cycle of activity. Restoration of existing buildings and development of new buildings in the CBD should, if possible, include residential in the upper floors.

4. **Increase the density downtown to reinforce the pedestrian environment.** The "fringes" of the downtown between commercial areas and residential areas are dominated by parking lots and vacant land

(Top) A continuous "street wall" of buildings creates an attractive pedestrian environment. See #4, at right. (Middle) "Strip" type uses and patterns of development on George Street are not appropriate for the downtown. See #5 at right.

Elements such as floral displays, landscaping, portals, and special paving can be combined to create a gateway into the downtown or important destinations within it. See # 7 at right.

and buildings. Infilling these areas with new buildings and improving the connections between the two areas will encourage people to explore the downtown on foot.

5. **Avoid suburban or rural land-use patterns in the downtown**, specially along the corridors that bring people into the downtown such as Ash, George, and Elm Streets. "Strip"-type development, continuous driveways along the edges of properties, parking in front of buildings, lack of screening, and lack of pedestrian amenities discourage people from exploring the downtown on foot, and discourage retail businesses and restaurants from locating there.

6. **Unify the downtown with common design elements** while allowing individual or area identity. Public streetscape and green spaces should include common design elements, such as paving materials, lighting, and street furniture in order to create a unified character for the downtown. Likewise, architecture should have elements that are repetitive or common in order to unify the whole. Within this unifying structure, however, there should still be ample room for individual expression. Architectural styles differ throughout the downtown, but a similar family of materials and streetscapes will help to unify them.

7. **Enhance gateways and view corridors.** The design of public and private areas that serve as gateways into the downtown, or that terminate views down important streets should be given special consideration. Examples of gateways to the downtown include the intersection on Ash immediately to the east of the railroad tracks, or the intersection of William and Ash Streets. These areas provide the opportunity to welcome visitors and residents into the downtown, and to establish or reinforce its unique identity.

2.3 Architectural Design Principles

1. Draw on regional styles of architecture to reinforce a sense of place. There is an attractive regional architectural style in the state and the eastern part of the state in both domestic and commercial architecture. Whenever possible modern construction should draw on the proportions and materials historically used in the area. This is not meant to dictate historic recreations, but rather to interpret historic regional architecture using current technology and creativity, and to avoid inappropriate architecture such as adobe architecture from the southwest.

2. **Orient the main facades of buildings to the street**.

3. **Avoid blank facades on the ground level and especially on the street.**

These two images illustrate how a building can serve as the termination of important view corridors along both Ash Street and Center Street (the clock tower). See #6 at right.

4. **Articulate buildings for visual interest.** Use of features such as brick banding, arched windows, articulated facades and cornices, interesting roof lines, setbacks on taller buildings and paneled storefronts adds to the visual interest when seen both from a distance and nearby.

5. **Use high quality building materials to** provide a quality image, fire safety, and permanence.

6. **Use sites of visual prominence to create architecture that responds to the opportunities presented.** Buildings that terminate views down important streets and buildings at important intersections are examples of perfect locations for special buildings or architectural features that celebrate their visual prominence.

7. **Articulate the ground floor of buildings to respond to the pedestrian.** Require ground floor architecture in commercial/retail areas to be "open" to the street. The traditional "storefront" in retail areas increases activity and adds to civic life through display of goods and services. Even where the activities are not strictly retail, such as the ground floor of a restaurant or office, transparency should still be employed to provide enhanced entry areas or views to attractive lobby spaces, atriums, or displays, and to provide flexibility of use over time. Where large buildings with few windows must face the street, such areas can be used to create outdoor seating areas or gardens. Consideration of safety must be taken into account, but whenever possible we would recommend the use of open grates or special thick glass rather than roll-down solid metal shutters in order to make the street attractive even when stores are closed.

2.3 Pedestrian Priority

1. **Give priority to pedestrians.** The goal of all elements in the plan and guidelines should be to create an ***attractive, unified and walkable environment that responds primarily to the needs of people rather than automobiles***. Creating a pedestrian-friendly environment should include the following elements:
   - *Barrier-free design both on the street and into and around buildings;*
   - *Separation between pedestrians, bikes and vehicles;*
   - *Creation of an interlocking pedestrian system within the entire downtown including sidewalks, street crosswalks (with crossing lights where necessary), and enhanced alleyways;*
   - *A comprehensive system of public signage to orient and inform the visitor to the downtown;*

Priority for people rather than automobiles

Restaurants and other attractions

Attractive pedestrian connections

Activities for all ages

- *Safe, attractive, and well-lit pedestrian connections between parking and sidewalks;*
- *Mid-block pedestrian connections on long blocks, and/or public passageways through central sections of large buildings to connect parking areas and the street;*
- *Careful design of streets and bikeways, including the incorporation of signage that informs bicyclists and motorists that pedestrians always have the right of way.*

2. **Create pedestrian spaces in retail and commercial areas that add to the life of the downtown.** In retail/commercial areas, the emphasis should be on parking one's vehicle and enjoying the area on foot. This translates into the need for connections, color, detail, wayfinding signage, interesting architecture, sun and shade, safe and attractive sidewalks, streets, parks and plazas. Elements that add to an active pedestrian environment should include:
   - *Active uses, detailing and transparency on the ground floor of all buildings;*
   - *Seating areas, parks and plazas integrated into the overall streetscape design to create safe, attractive areas for a whole range of activities from quiet conversation to large events;*
   - *Encouraging private spaces that add to the success of the downtown through the provision of such amenities as outdoor cafes and restaurants, seating areas, landscaping, and spaces for display or special events.*

3. **Sidewalks, crosswalks and handicap ramps** should be installed on all streets as they are renovated.

4. **Street trees** should be planted on all streets to unify and beautify the downtown.