DESIGN GUIDELINES: DOWNTOWN CHAPEL HILL

Prepared by
Downtown Small Area Plan Work Group

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Downtown Chapel Hill is a unique and valuable resource to this community and State. It has a special character that is obvious to the most casual observer, and which needs careful attention in order to continue.

These guidelines have been prepared to articulate what design objectives are expected as new development and redevelopment occurs in Downtown Chapel Hill. It is intended that this document will provide guidance to both designers and citizens in the preparation, review, and approval of plans.

KEY DESIGN OBJECTIVES

Buildings should be located and designed so that they provide visual interest and create enjoyable, human-scale spaces. Key objectives include:

- Buildings should be designed to be compatible, in form and proportion, with neighboring buildings.
- Buildings or groups of buildings should include a variety of forms, materials and colors, yet these elements should be composed to maintain a unified appearance.
- Buildings must include a richness of architectural detail to help define their scale.
- Buildings should extend to the back of the sidewalk.

PROPORTION AND SCALE

Proportion: the relationship of elements to one another in a building.

A building or group of buildings should be designed to be compatible with and sympathetic to the proportions of architectural forms, planes and details within the existing urban context. Proportions in architecture are the ratios established between length, width and height and may exist as planar or volumetric measurements. Doors, windows, stairs, porches, pediments, roof forms and complete building facades display proportional relationships.

Buildings should be no more than 2 stories tall where the property line abuts the sidewalk (requiring additional stories to be set back from the street building line). This lends a human scale to the street.

Scale: The relationship of a building to a person.

Building designs should incorporate architectural elements that give them a perceptible scale. For example: masonry coursing through the use of a familiar modular material lends "scale" to a building's mass. Individual building volumes and forms should

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Building Massing

Building massing should serve to define entry points to buildings and help to orient users.

The scale and proportion of the spaces between building masses should also be given careful consideration, especially in shopping and pedestrian areas. These “outdoor spaces” should be designed with attention given to their height, width, and length to maximize the comfort of users. These “outdoor spaces” should be light and airy with detailing that adds interest, orientation and spatial definition.

Individual building components should include proportional and scaled elements that are sympathetic to the scale and sensibilities of people.

Building massing should be broken up into human scaled elements whenever possible. An examples is the use of alcoves:

Rhythm

The rhythm of building massing is important in creating a visually comprehensible environment. This involves the organization of building elements or spaces between them in a logical sequential manner.

Breaks in a predominant rhythm can be used to emphasize major circulation points or changes of use.

Building elements that provide scale and establish streetside rhythms include: columns, modular fenestration, doorways, roof segments, wall patterns, lighting fixtures, signs, paving patterns, landscape elements.

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS

Entrances

Entrances should be easily identifiable as the primary points of access to buildings.

Entrances should provide an introductory statement for a building, and may be landscaped with plant material that can complement the building's architecture and style.

Entrances to individual stores or uses should be articulated for easy identification.

Entrances should be designed to allow individual businesses to present a clear defining image without compromising the sense of unity of the whole building block or facade.

Building details, especially at the ground or sidewalk level, should be selected and designed to create visual interest, enhance definition between individual businesses or “building slices” while still helping to reinforce the unity of the building block.

Facade Treatment

There should be a consistent or sympathetic treatment of all exterior faces of a given building with regard to color, materials, architectural form and detailing.

The number of different materials on exterior facades should be limited to a few complementary ones.

Ground floor level wall surfaces of retail spaces should include a high proportion of glass. Retail, storefront-type windows should abut the sidewalk.

Wall surfaces can have varying "setbacks" that form entrances, express structural elements, create special exhibit areas, planters, etc.

Such building elements as canopies, awnings, roof and floor overhangs, and colonnades all serve to provide protection to pedestrians, help to unify the parts of a building or block, provide a human scale, and may serve as backdrops for signage, graphics or other features that would change with time.

Individual building elements should be selected or designed to be harmonious with adjacent ones.

Business blocks should maintain a continuous neighborhood facade- for definition of sidewalk space and pedestrian interest.

Roof Design

Roof forms, color, material and texture should be compatible with the treatment of the building's exterior walls.

Roof design should minimize the negative impact of unsightly roof protrusions by grouping together or screening plumbing vents, ducts and other utility structures.

All rooftop mechanical and electrical equipment should be screened from view of people on the street.

Where roofs are used as unifying elements for larger building masses their sloped surfaces should be visible from building perimeter locations. A minimum pitch should be 7/12.

Flat roofs with parapets may be used where other means of unifying larger building masses are impractical.

Sloped roofing materials should be consistent in material and texture for each building. Appropriate material choices include: Dimensional fiberglass shingles, standing seam metal, tiles (slate, cementitious, etc.)

Roofing planes can exhibit offsets and changes in direction to establish scale and diversity of form. Dormers, reverse dormers, eyebrow windows and other similar roof elements are desirable.

Roof forms can be used to identify and establish entry points and to provide orientation from a distance.

EXTERIOR BUILDING MATERIALS

Hard surfaced exterior wall materials are generally recommended for downtown buildings. This can include brick, parged block (at service areas, locations that might be used for wall murals), painted brick, stone and plaster.

Materials used on exterior walls and roofs should not be highly reflective nor should they artificially simulate natural materials that they are not.

Highly tinted glass or glass tinted in unnatural colors or with a highly reflective finish should be avoided.

Color and Texture

Simple buildings can be made interesting by having their openings and entryways clearly expressed with offsets, and with changes of texture or color. Basic materials, texture, and color should be compatible with other buildings in the area.

Entries are transition areas and may be reinforced by special paving, planting and lighting treatment. Architecturally, they should be expressed by simple changes in form, line, color or texture.

Color and texture for architectural finishes should be selected to provide visual unity.

LIGHTING

Exterior lighting and site furniture should be architecturally integrated with the building's style, material, and color.

Lighting intensities should be controlled to assure that excessive light spillage and glare are not directed toward neighboring areas and motorists.

Down lighting should be used to reinforce circulation corridors.

Low-angle lighting of buildings generally is not encouraged. However, such lighting can be attractive if it is incorporated carefully into the architectural design.

All area lighting should result in a minimum of ½ f.c. at all pedestrian areas.

Area lighting visible to surrounding land uses should incorporate fixtures with illumination cut-off features to control light spillage. Fixtures should eliminate glare and visible light sources wherever possible. Diffusing and other lenses are encouraged.

Pedestrian level exterior fixtures are encouraged at all areas of pedestrian circulation. Bi-level street lighting (tall, less frequent lights for the vehicular portion of the street combined with shorter, more frequent fixtures for pedestrians) is one method of providing both street and sidewalk lighting.

Selected backdrops of buildings or vegetation may receive illumination.

Illumination of portions of buildings, direct or indirect, may be used where the utility or aesthetic results can be demonstrated.

SUMMARY

No more than 2 stories in height at property line.

Include alcoves, special treatments at entrances.

Storefront-type windows adjacent to sidewalk.

Build to property line.

Natural materials on exteriors.

Adherence to these guidelines should help assure that the best site and architectural features of Chapel Hill's downtown can be incorporated into the design of new development, and that such development will add to (rather than detract from) the character of this special place.