DESIGN GUIDELINES WATERTOWN'S COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS

A POCKET GUIDE to understanding the Design Guidelines for Watertown, MA

VISION FOR 2025

"We envision a vibrant and diverse future that builds upon our rich foundation of neighborhoods, culture, commercial squares and corridors, civic assets, and proximity to the Charles River and Boston." Our future includes:

- Stronger relationship with the Charles River
- Commercial squares & corridors that reinforce Watertown as a great place to live, work & play
- Leader in innovative economic development
- Proactive in maintaining public infrastructure and services
- Celebrating our diverse population, unique neighborhoods and historic and cultural heritage
- Attractive streetscapes along roadway corridors
- Progressive about sustainability
- Promoting an active and healthy lifestyle.*

**Adapted from Watertown Comprehensive Plan 2014, VHB*

These Guidelines have been developed to address the **design of new buildings along the major corridors** and Watertown and Coolidge Squares. They are organized into nine overarching categories that each address different aspects of the built environment, and are intended to enhance building, parking and the public realm interface to the Mixed Use, Commercial, and Industrial district regulations.

architecture urban design GAMBLE ASSOCIATES

VERSION I

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OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

DESIGN AESTHETIC

These Design Guidelines cannot depict every possible building configuration on each site. Rather, a **prototypical building footprint** is shown in a manner that accommodate many conditions that emerge on a project site. The massing is general enough that it can contain a range of uses, but specific enough to highlight the critical areas of concern. Even when closely following these guidelines, each project will take its own form that will differ from the example shown here. A singular design aesthetic in Watertown is neither viable nor desirable.

ECONOMIC VITALITY

Watertown's Design Guidelines were created to enhance the economic vitality of selected existing commercial areas through attractive, consistent design. By following these guidelines, each project will complement another, resulting in a cohesive development over time. The guidelines were developed specifically to provide direction for the design of new infill development in commercial areas. The goal is not to limit creativity, but rather to recognize potential for architectural diversity while adhering to the overarching principles contained herein. They intend to define expectations for new development while allowing for flexibility and fostering **high quality design.**

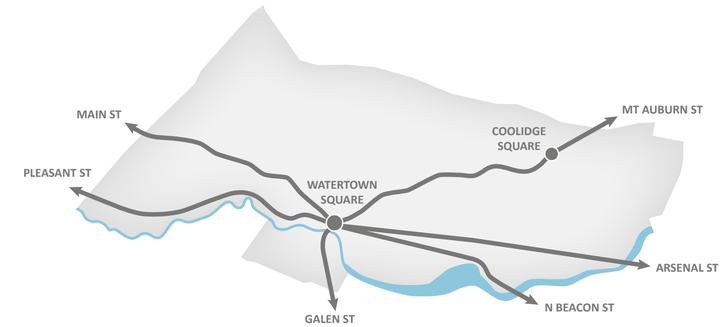
ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE

New development comes with the obligation to implement sustainable design and construction practices that incorporate technological innovation and green building practices. It should strive to address the **highest sustainable and ecological principles**, using advanced green technologies and materials, and promoting high-performance buildings. New buildings should be constructed with local, low-embodied energy materials and constructed with the highest standards for environmental sustainability.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Urban regeneration means more than simply building anew; historic preservation is an effective economic development strategy. The **reuse and regeneration of existing buildings should be encouraged** in addition to new development as they provide a direct connection to Watertown's past. Existing buildings that have retained cultural or architectural significance can form the basis for economic development and growth.

NEIGHBORHOODS, CORRIDORS, AND SQUARES



Watertown is defined by its relationship to the Charles River, as well as by its squares and the commercial corridors that link them. Together, these stitch together the various residential neighborhoods which make up the majority of the Town.

The Design Guidelines focus on these links and nodes, outlining best practices to guide sustainable future growth. By strengthening the character of these major corridors, **greater connectivity and a richer "sense of place"** can be achieved.

ALTERNATIVE ENERGY — Employ solar panels and turbines where possible

OVERALL HEIGHT — Correlate to width/character of the street and context

UPPER STEP-BACKS — Reduce the apparent height of the building and create outdoor spaces

ROOFTOP SIGNS — Rooftop signs are prohibited

INTERMEDIATE FLOORS — Add texture and depth, and avoid monotonous panels

FACADE DEPTH — Break up massing and use balconies to increase depth

STREET WALL — Build to sidewalk in urban sites, sidwalk width varies by scale

OVERHANGS/AWNINGS — Provide shelter for pedestrians, potential for signage/lighting

SIGNAGE — Employ attractive, handmade signage, limit florescent lighting

GROUND FLOOR — Highest degree of material detail and transparency

STREETSCAPE — Provide benches, bicycle storage, and street trees

STORM WATER RUNOFF — Incorporate rain gardens and permeable paving

ON-STREET PARKING — Calms vehicular traffic and buffers people from cars

ENTRANCES — Entrances should be frequent along the public right-of-way

CYCLE TRACKS — Increase bike travel and safety by locating along sidewalk

SHARED PARKING — Reduce parking requirements by sharing parking between sites

GEOTHERMAL ENERGY — Where possible, incorporate geothermal heating/cooling

SIGNATURE MOMENTS — Greater height reserved for select/prominent areas

ROOFTOP MECHANICALS — Locate towards center of roof and visually shield from view

GLAZING + WINDOWS — Use high-performance, low-emissivity, double pane windows

GREEN ROOFS — Employ where possible to reduce heat island/runoff

REAR STEPBACKS — Diminish height and shadows, and provide decks/balconies

FACADE TREATMENT — Create hierarchies and patterns to impart scale

BUILDING ENVELOPE — Use high-performance insulation and cladding to reduce heat loss

NEIGHBORHOOD FABRIC — Taper height to provide transition to residential areas

GREEN BUFFER — Use trees and shrubs to shield adjacent properties

LOWER LEVELS — Use large amounts of glazing and durable, natural materials

SIGNAGE — Regularize location and correlate to entrances

CONNECTIONS — Provide walking and cycling links to adjacent neighborhoods

PROGRAM DISTRIBUTION — Encourage a mix of uses, with public ones on lower floors

PUBLIC SPACE — Enable areas for outdoor seating and pocket parks

BIKE INFRASTRUCTURE — Provide secure bicycle storage and maintenance spaces

BUILDING LENGTH — Allow pass-throughs to break up large blocks

UNDERGROUND PARKING — Reduces surface lots and visually shields parking

PUBLIC REALM INTERFACE | PARKING + ACCESS | SUSTAINABLE DESIGN | BUILDING MASSING | BUILDING HEIGHT | BUILDING SETBACKS | FACADE TREATMENT | MATERIAL SELECTION | SIGNAGE

PUBLIC REALM INTERFACE

The relationship of the building to the street (in the form of setbacks or build-to lines) plays a key role in the ability of a development to enhance or detract from the experience of a place. Commercial corridors are most successful when **the street edge is defined with active ground floor uses with a high degree of transparency.** A vibrant public realm interface is essential for a successful community. How a building relates to the public realm makes an enormous difference in the quality of the development and the degree to which the building contributes to public life.

While the massing of a building and its height, scale, profile and orientation have a significant impact on one's impression of a place, the manner in which it meets the ground is the most critical. Entrances and ground floor windows should be at grade, easily accessible and they should aid in pedestrian comfort, safety and orientation.

ENCOURAGE:

- First floor uses that draw walk-in traffic and enhance pedestrian interest
- Appropriately scaled sidewalks for the density of development and street type
- Greater connectivity to existing neighborhood parks, the river and bike paths
- The incorporation of bike paths and large caliper tree plantings in planting strips
- Appealing outdoor spaces around buildings that are publicly-accessible
- Public art opportunities
- Universal Design

DISCOURAGE:

- Residual, privately-owned public spaces that lack connectivity
- Wide building setbacks along commercial corridors
- Projects that preference the use of the automobile over walking or biking
- Multiple curb cuts on a single property

PARKING + ACCESS

Parking is always a primary consideration and its location on the site can be varied. When parking is located in front of buildings, it often requires multiple curb-cuts for the property it serves. As a result, the relationship of the building to the street favors vehicles, not pedestrians. Surface parking lots located in front of commercial establishments facilitate access for patrons but do little to improve the character of the street or public realm.

Consideration should be given to shared parking opportunities where day and night uses do not overlap. **Opportunities for shared parking** must be pursued to increase development potential wherever possible and diminish the impact of the automobile. This has the added benefit of encouraging alternate modes of transportation and enhanced transit ridership. Regardless of where they are located, existing and future parking lots must be visually buffered by trees and native grasses. Development should consider the pedestrian first, then bicyclists, then transit and then the automobile.

ENCOURAGE:

- A reduction of parking requirements required by zoning
- More underground and or under building parking
- Well landscaped surface lots with and visual landscape buffers
- Surface parking to the rear or middle of the block
- The incorporation of car sharing, electric charging stations and transit shuttles
- Parking design which anticipates winter limitations
- Greater emphasis on bicycle, pedestrian access and public transit

DISCOURAGE:

- Surface parking in front of buildings
- Projects which preference cars over pedestrians and bicyclists
- Parking garages that contain large blank walls

SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

"Sustainable" is one of the most widely used but increasingly ambiguous and misunderstood terms in design vocabulary. The term is used here to describe projects that are connected with the environment in which they reside. A development that is sustainable utilizes alternative and renewable energy sources for energy generation and retention. Sustainable buildings use less energy through the use of solar panels, wind turbines and geothermal fields. Projects that have rainwater harvesting, green roofs, energy responsive facades, sun-shading devices, natural daylighting, recycled content and low embodied energy materials are sustainable. **A sustainable design approach effectively balances environmental and aesthetic concerns.**

A building's use, massing, orientation, and design character influence a great deal how a building relates to its context. Deploying sustainable design and construction strategies ensures that these decisions are made in the service of a greater objective which acknowledges the impact that construction has on our environment. A sustainable design approach is one where environmental responsibility is an integral part of the design, and the negative impacts associated with development are minimized. A sustainable ethic involves making careful, ecologically conscious decisions at every point in the planning, design and construction process. A sustainable building treads lightly on the earth.

ENCOURAGE:

- Low impact development and maximum LEED requirements*
- Renewable energy sources: solar, wind and geothermal
- The incorporation of green roofs, garden spaces and healthy tree growth
- Landscape strategies that address stormwater with rain gardens and permeable pavers
- State-of-the-art energy efficiency and the use of green infrastructure

DISCOURAGE:

- Single use buildings accessible solely by car
- Large expanses of asphalt and surface parking areas
- Developments that do little to work with existing topography

*LEED: Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design, US Green Building Council

BUILDING MASSING

Building massing has to do with the overall proportion of a structure, including the dimensions of the building footprint and its relationship to the context where it resides. As Watertown's density increases and previously vacant or low density sites fill in with new buildings, figuring out how to manage massing becomes increasingly important.

Larger building masses are most appropriate for Watertown Square, the historical commercial center of the Town. Greater building height and mass is recommended in this area. The commercial corridors of Mt. Auburn Street and Arsenal Street - with their traditional mixed-use fabric - are also viable candidates for larger building masses as are portions of Pleasant Street and Main Street. As new development sites get closer to existing residential areas, **a building's mass should taper to relate more closely with the character of established neighborhoods.**

ENCOURAGE:

- Breaking a buildings mass into smaller forms
- Variation in building massing for large projects
- Pass-throughs and breaks which diminish super-blocks
- Emphasizing corners and other important alignments
- Public open spaces commensurate with a project's scale
- Lower massing in areas abutting residential areas and near the river

DISCOURAGE:

- Big boxes with monotonous and repetitive building elevations
- Large blocks with few connections between buildings
- Building clusters that have the same look and design
- Large building footprints along narrow right-of-ways
- Inwardly focused enclaves with few connections to the surroundings

BUILDING HEIGHT

Height constitutes just one aspect of a building's massing, but it is undoubtedly the most conspicuous. Historical building heights in Watertown vary, with greater height generally reserved for civic buildings, institutions, places of worship, and older manufacturing facilities. The vast majority of the buildings, however, are just one or two stories along the primary commercial corridors. Heights are impacted by a variety of factors including the individual floor to floor dimensions, the type of construction, the contours of a site, use and the scale of the surroundings.

Greater height in certain locations can be beneficial, and increasing heights in some areas can offset the need for building in other places. The impact of height can be diminished when offset by the inclusion of open space or a building setback. A taller building will appear less tall when setback from the street edge. When concerns about density arise as a result of a building's height, the relationship of the building façade to the public-right-of-way can have a greater impact than any other dimension. At the same time, what is deemed an appropriate height for a building is relative to the urban context.

ENCOURAGE:

- A range of three (3) to five (5) stories in the primary commercial areas
- Upper story step-backs to diminish the visual impact of the building
- Referencing the heights and setbacks of adjacent buildings
- A range of building heights to create visual interest on a project
- Transition zones tapering heights to adjacent residential areas
- Modest height allowances in lieu of incorporating public amenities

DISCOURAGE:

- Large scale height discrepancies between new buildings and existing neighborhoods
- The "canyon effect" created by a series of buildings close to one another
- Significant shadow impacts created by tall buildings

BUILDING SETBACKS

The dimension from a building to the street edge has everything to do with how a space feels. In urban areas with a lot of commercial activity, it is important to maintain a continuous street wall with modest or few building setbacks. **Setbacks that do occur should be used for pocket parks, plazas, seating areas or landscape zones.** What constitutes an appropriate building setback is impacted by the character and scale of the street it fronts, the type of uses on the ground floor of the building and the concentration of pedestrian activity. Urban corridors are most vibrant when they help to define a streetwall.

While aligning an elevation to the property line is most often the appropriate response for a building in an urban setting, there are instances, where some spatial relief is necessary and a building setback should be included as part of a property's development. Along Watertown's commercial corridors, modest setbacks function best for residential buildings and areas of high traffic. Setbacks are also beneficial in mature neighborhoods where the street width is narrow.

ENCOURAGE:

- Building setbacks on upper floors above three or four stories
- Areas for active programming in setbacks for shops and cafes
- Appropriate landscaping in areas of generous setbacks
- Wide planting areas for large shade trees and rain gardens

DISCOURAGE:

- The "canyon effect" with large buildings in close proximity to the street
- Buildings close to sidewalks in residential areas
- Surface parking in setback zones
- Oversized setbacks that disconnect the building from the sidewalk and public realm

FACADE TREATMENT

The façade is the primary public or streetside of the building in its entirety from the sidewalk or grade level to the uppermost portion of the roofline. Corner buildings have two primary facades. The character of an elevation depends on a number of factors: the proportion and orientation of openings, the composition of the fenestration, the color and patterning of the exterior skin and the relationship between the various parts of the exterior. **Durable, high quality materials** will add a level of sophistication to a large and/or minimally-detailed façade, whereas inexpensive materials make a nicely-proportioned building look cheap. A building's elevation or facade says a lot about the quality and character of a building.

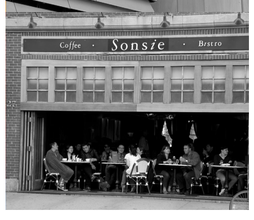
While the overall composition of a façade is important, the greatest amount of detail needs to be reserved for the ground floor. This is the area which garners the most attention and view for pedestrians. However, the roofline is also important, and mechanical equipment and rooftop vents should be minimized from view with parapet walls or screens. **Style is subjective.** Some people prefer classic over contemporary or historical over modern. What matters most in a building's elevation is quality and consistency.

ENCOURAGE:

- High quality and natural materials
- Greater transparency at the ground level
- The use of balconies of terraces to expand space and provide depth
- Outdoor seating areas within stepback zones of the elevation
- Breaking up vertical and horizontal building lines

DISCOURAGE:

- Cheap exterior building finishes
- Monolithic façade treatments
- Excessively long and uninterrupted building elevations
- Flat, blank walls along street facing elevations



MATERIAL SELECTION

There is a direct connection between material choice and environmental stewardship. Buildings account for half of all the world's greenhouse gases and consume 50% of its raw materials.* **Products and materials that are specified for construction should be selected with respect to their performative and sustainable qualities rather than just trends or aesthetics.** With this in mind, materials should be chosen based on their durability, maintenance and recyclability characteristics, energy use, and consumption profile. In other words, projects should be built with natural and sustainable materials.

Whenever possible, materials should be selected that are locally harvested, have a low embodied energy content and are recyclable. Using local materials reduces the transportation and distribution costs of the product. Products that reduce raw material use should be chosen because of their resource conservation. Zero or low-emission building products should be specified to improve air quality.

ENCOURAGE:

- The use of high quality materials that are locally sourced
- Green materials with low embodied energy and are recyclable
- Materials that are environmentally and historically appropriate for Watertown
- The incorporation of texture to add variation and tactility to facades

DISCOURAGE:

- Flat repetitive facades that lack texture and depth
- The use of vinyl, large panels or other inexpensive materials
- Faux historical facades or those that mimic other materials

* *Green Architecture*, Osman Attmann (2010)

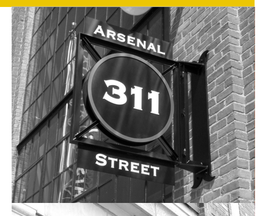
SIGNAGE

Commercial establishments need to advertise. However, advertising signs should be effective and appropriate to Watertown's historic areas without contributing to visual clutter. A balance needs to be struck between the desire to call attention to individual businesses and the desire for a **positive collective image for Watertown**. Signs can either complement or detract from that image a depending on their design, placement, quantity, size, materials, colors and condition.

Certain types of signs are more appropriate to specific areas than others. What is appropriate for a suburban strip mall is inappropriate for a downtown setting. These sign guidelines relate to the commercial corridors.

ENCOURAGE:

- Attractive signs that are proportional to the building where they are located
- Traditional sign materials such as wood or raised metal letters
- Projecting signs (shingle signs) oriented to a pedestrian scale of modest size
- More decorative or handmade signs that are understated and not overwhelming
- Signs that are located above the storefront (frieze or transom)
- Colors that complement the materials and color schemes of the building

DISCOURAGE:

- Stand-alone signs that are not designed as an integral part of the building
- Internally lit plastic molded signs
- Neon and fluorescent or beacon signs
- Inconsistency amongst signs in the business district
- Rooftop