

# WATERTOWN DESIGN GUIDELINES + STANDARDS

Watertown is in the process of completing a Comprehensive Plan. The community's Vision for 2025 identifies a *"vibrant and diverse future"* that builds upon Watertown's *"rich foundation of neighborhoods, culture, commercial squares and corridors, civic assets and proximity to the Charles River and Boston."* The Key Implementation Action under Land Use in the Comprehensive Plan is to *"address design issues along the major corridors and Watertown and Coolidge Squares that enhances aesthetics while preserving neighborhood character"* (Source: VHB, 2014). Implementing design and landscape standards for the Mixed-use, Limited and Central Commercial and Industrial Districts is Goal Number One.

**Watertown's Design Guidelines and Standards are being created to enhance the economic vitality of selected commercial areas through attractive, consistent design.** By following these guidelines and standards, each project will complement another, resulting in a cohesive development over time. They are being developed specifically to provide direction for the design of new infill development and redevelopment in commercial and industrial areas. While the renovation and reuse of existing historic buildings and the impact of new residential development in existing neighborhoods are important, they are not the primary focus of this work.

Various architectural styles have contributed to the character of Watertown. **The goal of these guidelines 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. Reference images that are included are intended to provide a point of reference for the text, but by no means are they the only precedents to draw upon.

Development in Watertown will occur on a site-by-site basis, with individual projects advanced by different development entities and according to their own schedules. Institutions, private developers and non-profit agencies will create plans and build buildings to accommodate different uses in ways that reflect their respective missions and the market dynamics of the time. The form of each building will be driven largely by its use, and different building types have different design criteria. For example, an institutional floor plate is generally a different dimension than a residential plan.



**PUBLIC MEETING #2**  
November 22, 2014

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These Design Guidelines and Standards cannot depict every possible building configuration on each site. A number of building masses are shown as prototypical building footprints in a manner that accommodates varying conditions that may emerge on a project site. The massing is general enough that it can contain a range of uses, but it is specific enough to highlight 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. This is a good thing. Like the complexion of a healthy neighborhood, diversity in building form and architectural style is beneficial to the character of a place. **A singular design aesthetic in Watertown is neither viable nor desirable.**

Due to its role, volume and impact, **architecture has a direct responsibility to the health and wellness of our neighborhoods and community.** New development offers an opportunity to move towards responsible, sustainable construction practices that acknowledges technological innovation and green building practices. New development should strive to address the highest sustainable and ecological principles, using advanced green technologies and materials, and promoting and demanding high-performance buildings. Construction should incorporate a high percentage of local and low-embodied energy materials and utilize the highest standards for environmental sustainability.

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. Redevelopment need not be all new construction.

There are nine categories (listed at right) within the Design Guidelines. The images that follow are a starting point for additional diagrams that will be included under each category. In addition, specific Standards will be developed moving forward which will be included as an amendment to Watertown's Zoning Ordinance.

For further information please contact the Department of Development and Planning: (617) 972-6417.



**PUBLIC REALM  
INTERFACE**



**PARKING  
+ ACCESS**



**SUSTAINABLE  
DESIGN**



**BUILDING  
MASSING**



**BUILDING  
HEIGHT**



**BUILDING  
SETBACKS**



**FACADE  
TREATMENT**



**MATERIAL  
SELECTION**



**SIGNAGE**



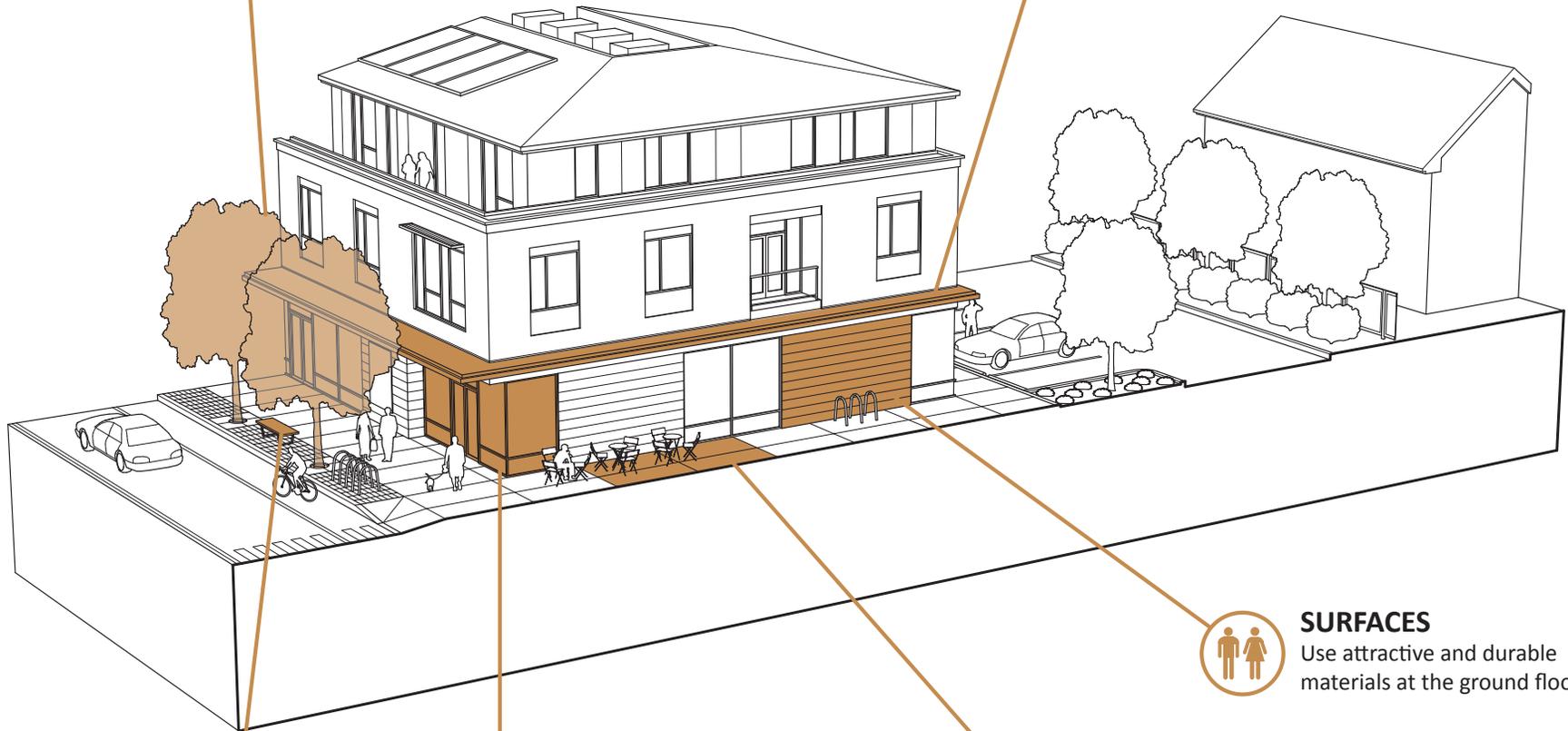
# PUBLIC REALM INTERFACE

DRAFT 11.22.14

**STREET TREES**  
Provide shade and buffer pedestrians from the street



**CANOPIES**  
Provide protection from the elements and shade ground level glazing



**STREET FURNITURE**  
Provide seating, bike racks, and other amenities



**ENTRANCES/GLAZING**  
Increase ground floor transparency and activate sidewalk



**PUBLIC SPACES**  
Incorporate active outdoor public spaces



**SURFACES**  
Use attractive and durable materials at the ground floor





The relationship of the building to the street (in the form of setbacks or build-to lines) plays an essential 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 vital for a successful community.

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 equally critical. **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.** Entrances and ground floor windows should be at grade, easily accessible. In most instances, entries should foster pedestrian comfort, safety and orientation.

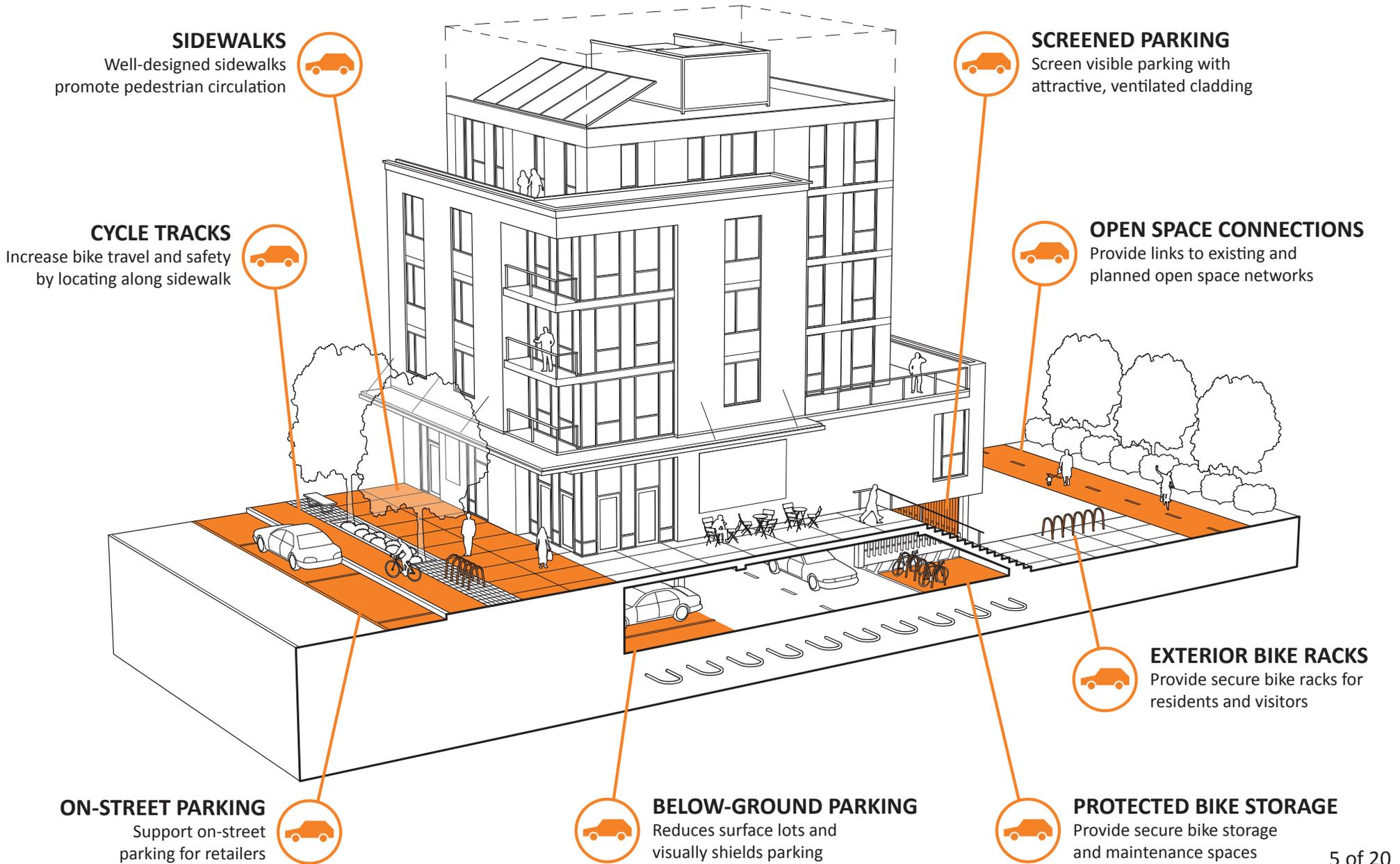
## Encourage:

- 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 neighborhoods, 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 active and publically-accessible
- Opportunities for public art installations
- "Complete Street" approaches that include pedestrian and bicycle amenities
- Burying overhead utilities below grade

## 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
- Large expanses of blank walls along primary streets





**New development should consider the pedestrian first, then bicyclists, then transit and then the automobile.** Nonetheless, parking is always a priority 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 increased transit ridership. Regardless of where they are located, existing and future parking lots should be visually buffered by landscape buffers or other techniques.

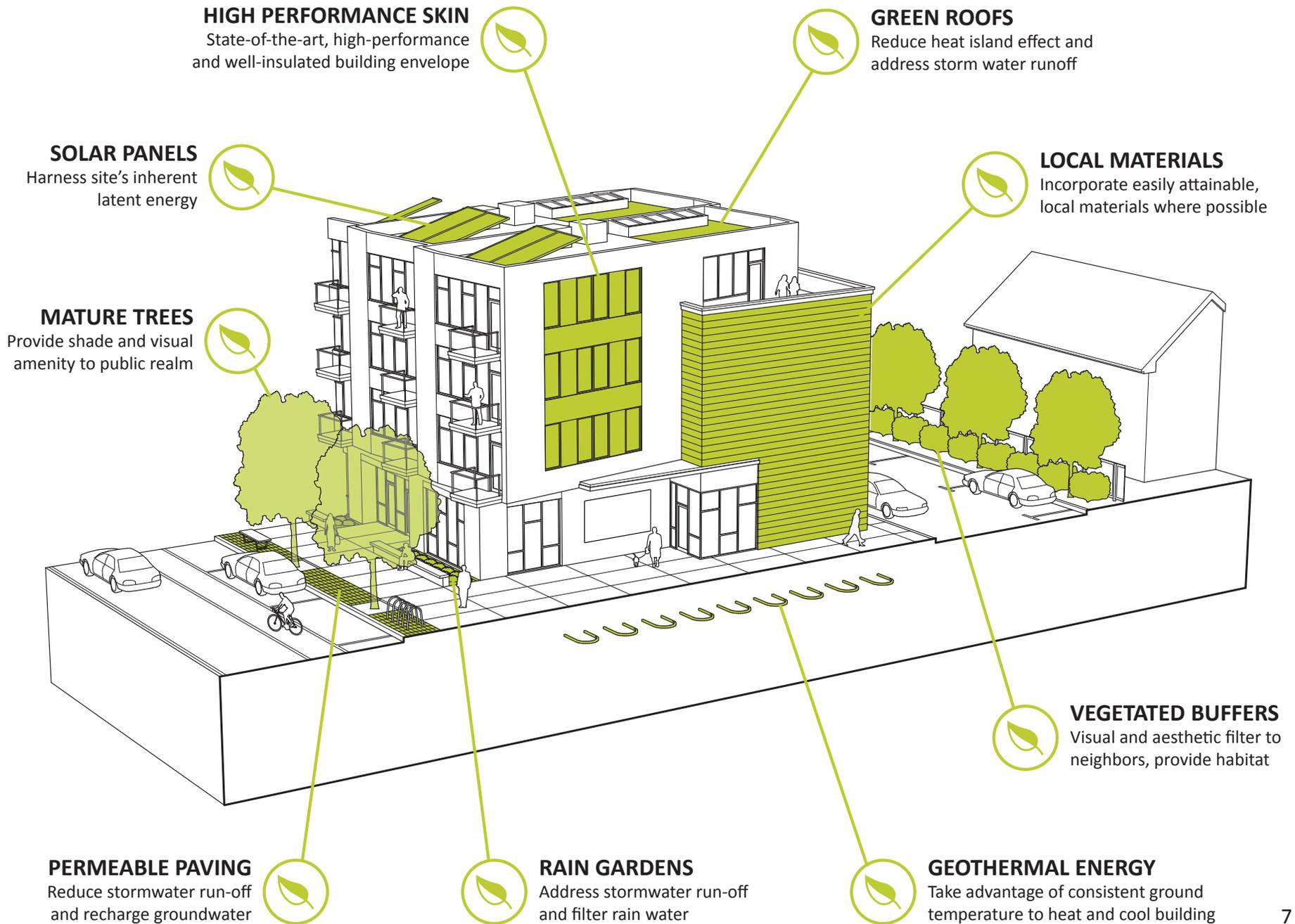
## Encourage:

- A reduction of parking requirements required by zoning
- More underground, under building parking and parking liners
- Well landscaped surface lots with visual 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 sharing, pedestrian access and public transit
- New on-street parking to support retail development

## Discourage:

- Surface parking in front of buildings
- Projects which preference cars over pedestrians and bicyclists
- Large surface parking lots
- Parking garages that contain large blank walls
- Elimination of on-street parking







“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 truly sustainable design approach effectively balances environmental, economic, social 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 for stormwater and maximum LEED standards\*
- 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 with respect to building systems and envelope
- Building for climate change and associated impacts

### 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
- Materials which have a short life-span

\*See US Green Building Council: “Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design”





### FACADE VARIATION

Diminish long elevations by providing visual relief and variety



### VERTICAL ELEMENTS

Break down large building masses into component elements



### BASE LEVELS

Integrate building into its site and enrich ground level experience





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. **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
- Public open spaces commensurate with a project's scale
- Lower massing in areas abutting residential areas and near the river

## Discourage:

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





# BUILDING HEIGHT

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## BONUS HEIGHT

Potential additional height for public space amenities



## MAXIMUM ALLOWABLE HEIGHT

Greatest height reserved for commercial and industrial corridors



## REFERENCING CONTEXT

Integrate into context by mirroring heights of adjacent buildings



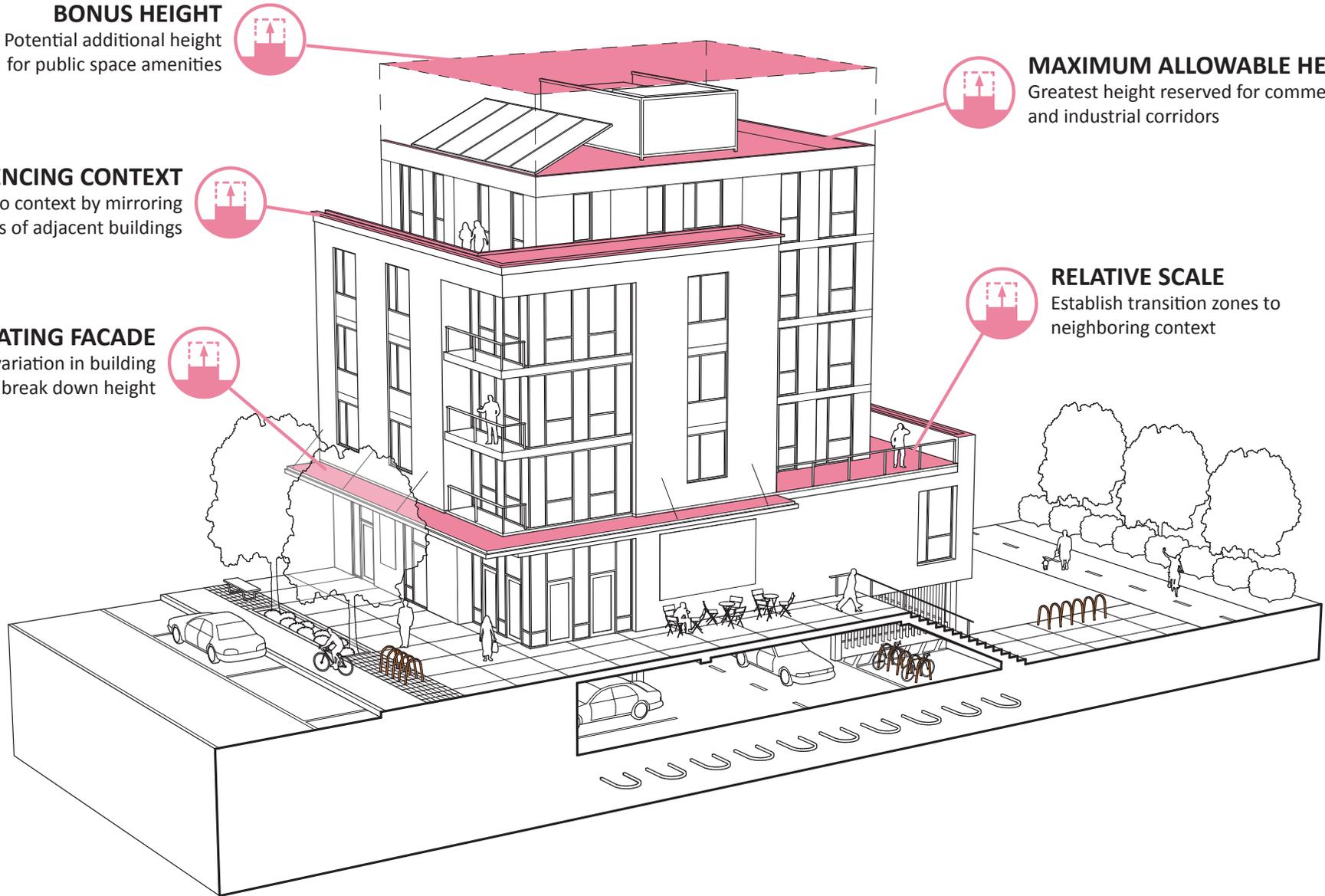
## DELINEATING FACADE

Create variation in building elements to break down height



## RELATIVE SCALE

Establish transition zones to neighboring context





Heights constitute just one aspect of a building's massing, but they are undoubtedly the most conspicuous. Historical building heights in Watertown vary, with greater height reserved civic buildings, institutions, places of worship and former industrial buildings. 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; it depends on the context.

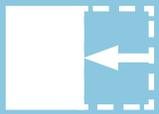
## Encourage:

- 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
- A range of building heights to create visual interest
- The flexibility to allow greater height in certain locations
- Transition zones tapering heights to adjacent residential areas
- Modest height bonuses for the incorporation of 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
- Excessively tall buildings in close proximity to the Charles River





## STREET STEP BACKS

Reduce the apparent height and provide opportunities for terraces



## REAR STEP BACKS

Reduce overall visual impact of building mass



## SIDE STEP BACKS

Allow better access to natural light and ventilation



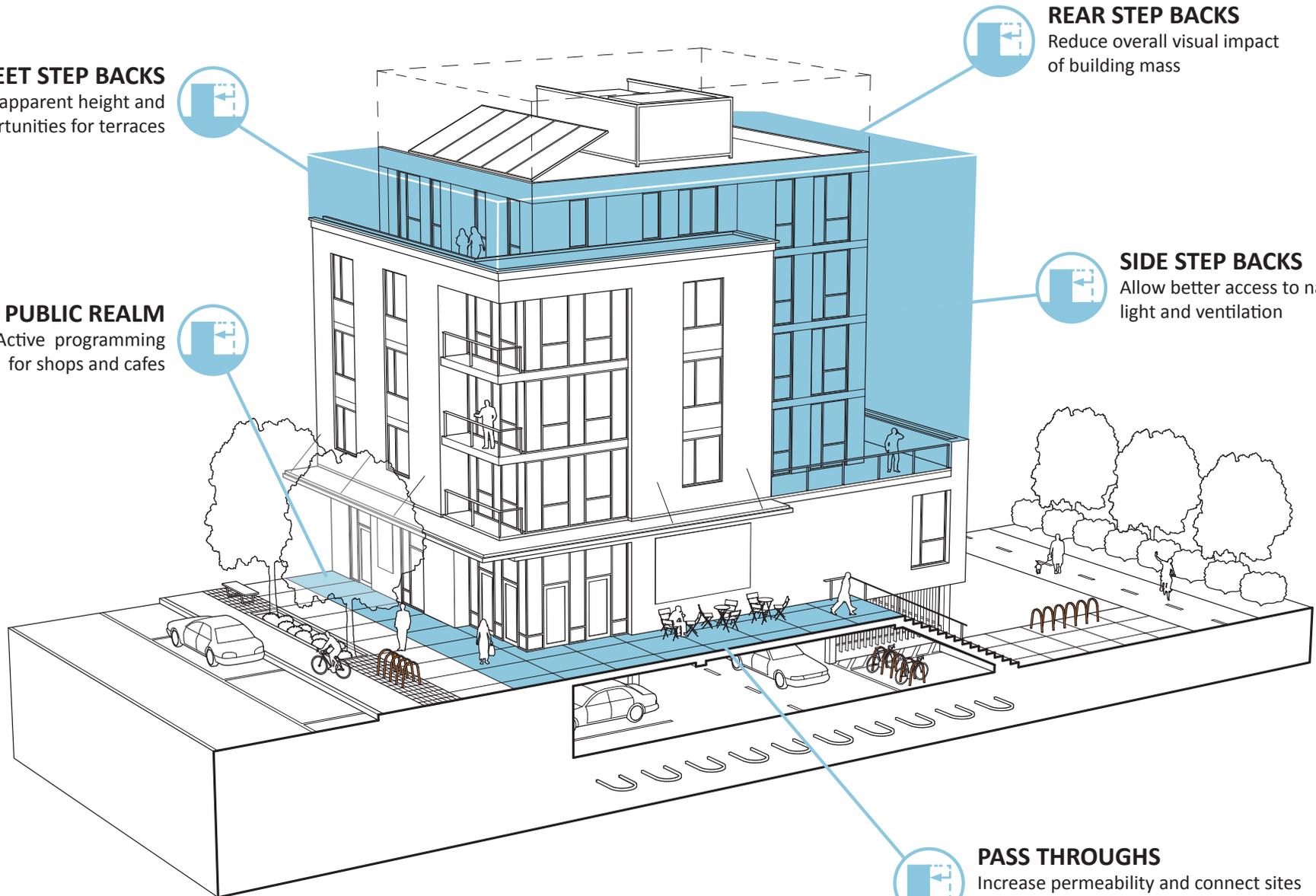
## PUBLIC REALM

Active programming for shops and cafes



## PASS THROUGHS

Increase permeability and connect sites together with open space networks





The critical dimension measured from a building edge 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 lush landscape zones that are publically-accessible. **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 on adjoining sites.

Setbacks function best when they are consistently deployed, but they should vary depending on their location in Watertown. Larger landscape setbacks are appropriate for residential areas and large buildings, whereas urban areas are most vibrant when they help to define the street wall. **Aligning an elevation to the property line is most often the appropriate response for a building in an urban setting.** There are instances, however, where some spatial relief is necessary and a building setback should be included as part of a property's development. This can be particularly true in more mature neighborhoods where the street width is narrow.

## Encourage:

- Increased building step backs 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
- Varied building facades with porches and open landings

## Discourage:

- The canyon effect with tall buildings with no visual relief
- Large-scale buildings close to sidewalks in residential areas
- Surface parking in setback zones and drive roads
- Expansive setbacks that disconnect the building from the public realm





# FACADE TREATMENT

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## EAVES / OVERHANGS

Reduce solar gain and provide vertical terminus



## WINDOW SIZE

Size of opening should correspond to the program associated with them



## CORNICES

Reinforce the visible vertical edges of the building



## RHYTHMS + PATTERNS

Create hierarchies of elements to create a sense of proportion



## CREATING DEPTH

Recesses and bays create variety and depth, avoiding a blank boxy facade



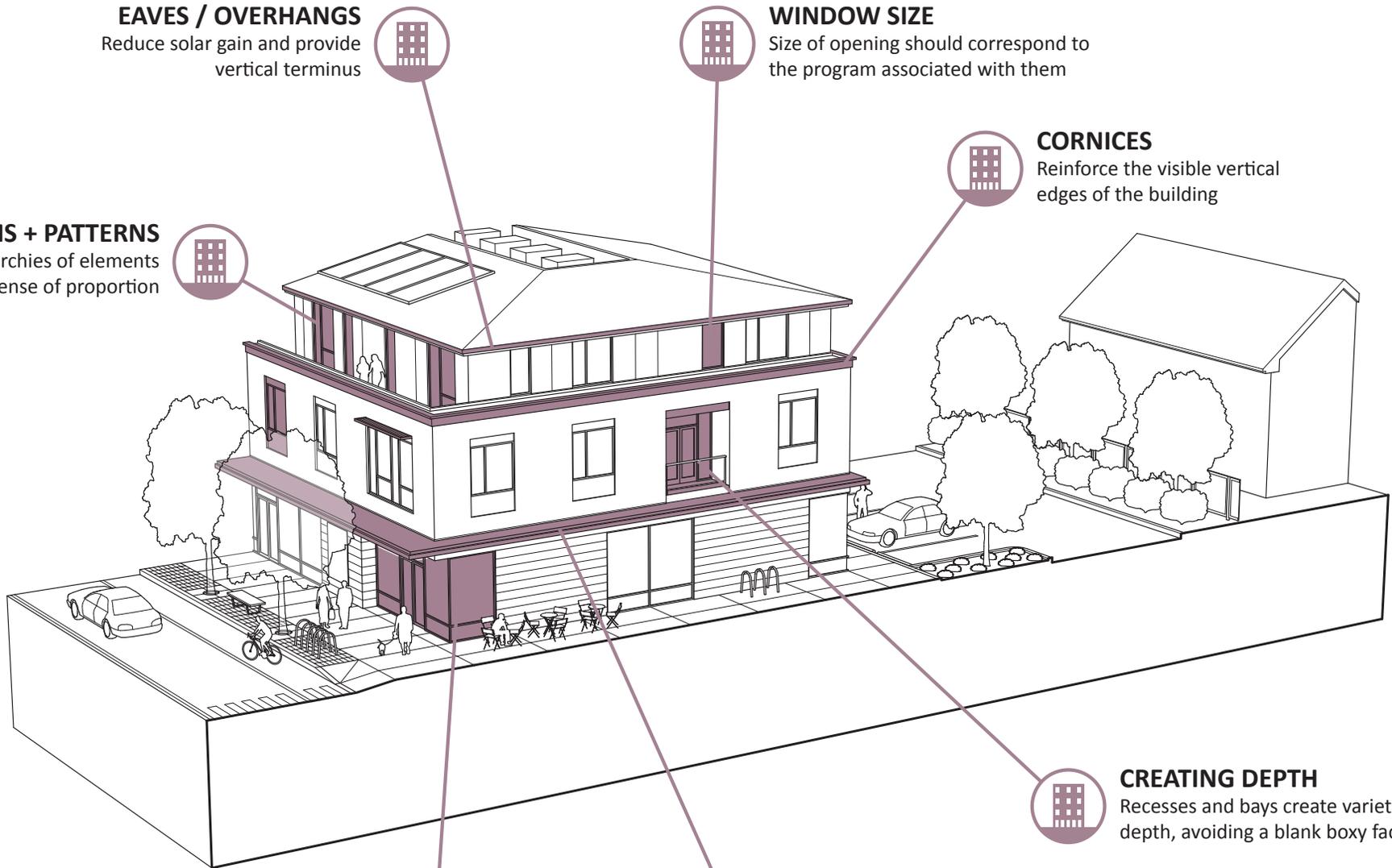
## TRANSPARENCY

Increase ground-level activity by including large areas of transparency



## AWNINGS / CANOPIES

Create shade, signage opportunities, and horizontal breaks in elevation





A building's elevation or facade says a lot about the quality and character of a building. The facade is defined as 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 facade, whereas inexpensive materials can make a nicely-proportioned building look cheap.**

While the overall composition of a facade 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 by their placement and with parapet walls or screens. The issue of style for a building is influenced a good deal by the elevation, although **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 durable materials
- Greater transparency at the ground level (clear windows)
- The use of balconies, bay windows or terraces to expand space and provide depth
- Outdoor seating areas within step back zones of the elevation for upper floors
- Breaking up vertical and horizontal building lines (note: can be overdone)

## Discourage:

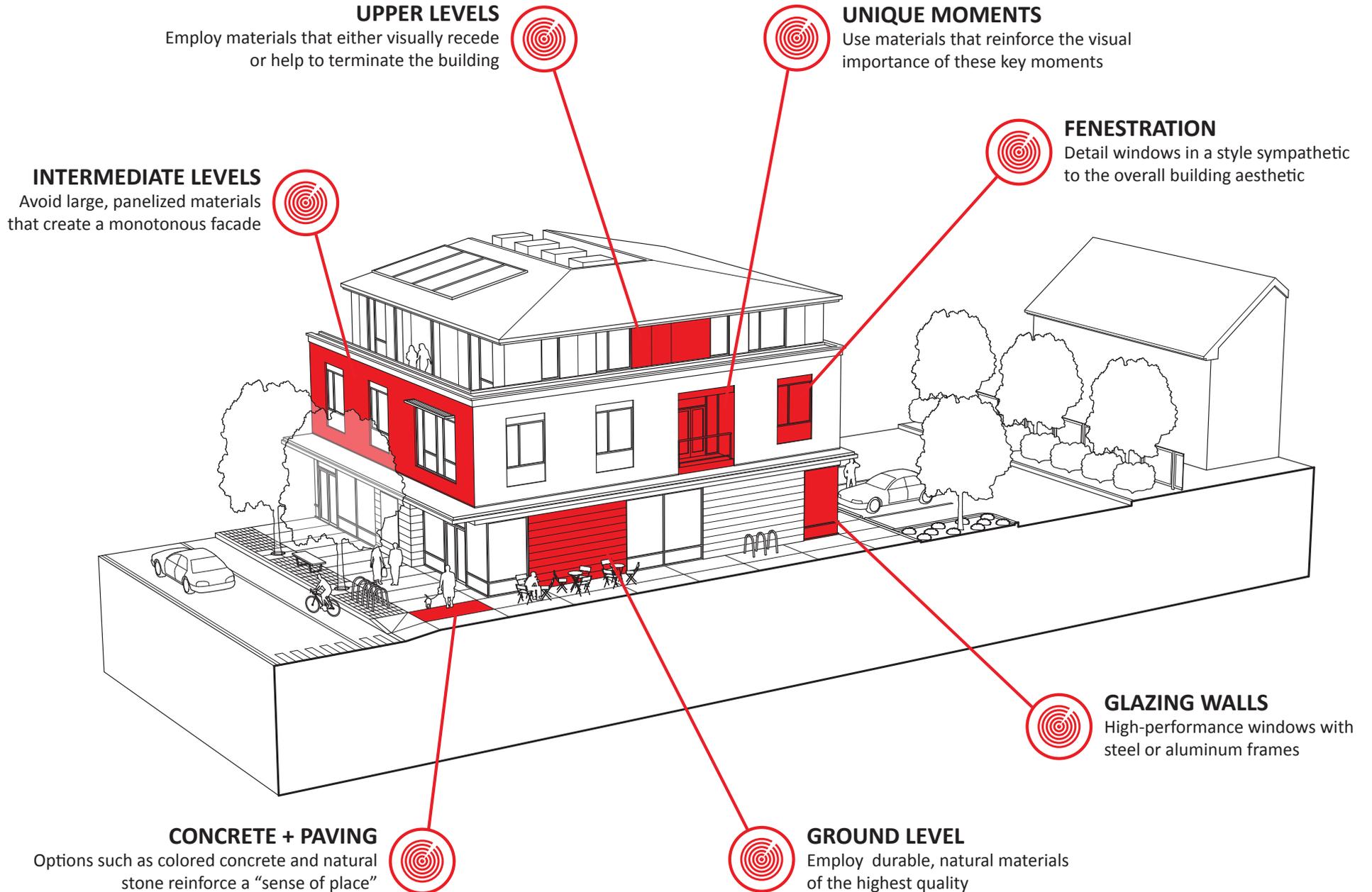
- Cheap exterior building finishes
- Monolithic facade treatments
- Excessively long and uninterrupted building elevations
- Flat, blank walls along street facing elevations
- The presence of utility transformers along primary streets





# MATERIAL SELECTION

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**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 clad 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 in both the interior and exterior to improve air quality.

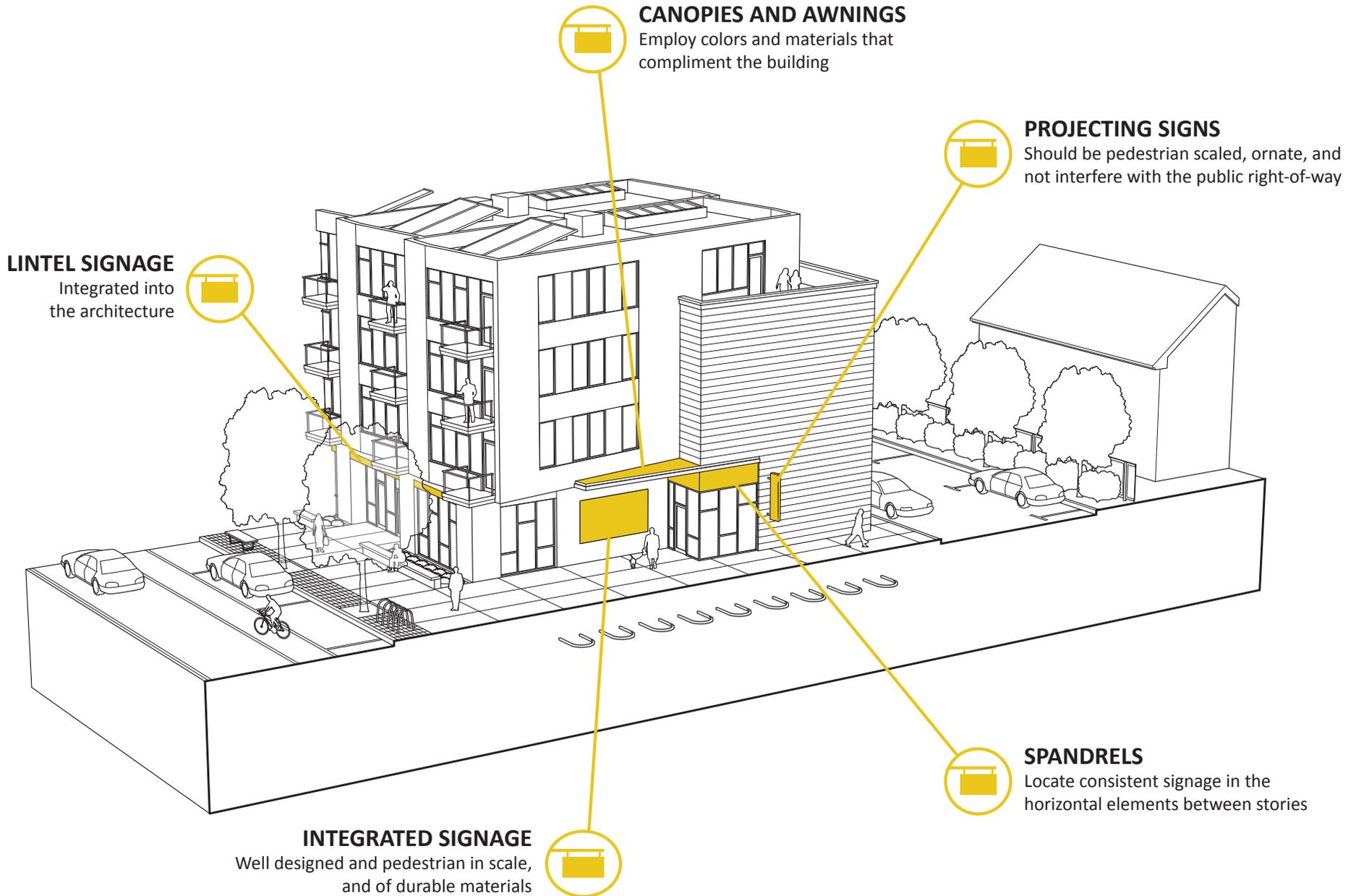
## Encourage:

- The use of high quality materials that are durable
- Sustainable, reasonable supply source materials that are not rare or hard to replace
- Materials that are environmentally and historically appropriate for Watertown
- Green materials with low embodied energy and are recyclable
- The incorporation of texture to add variation and tactility to facades

## Discourage:

- Flat repetitive facades that lack texture and depth
- The use of vinyl or other poor performing materials







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 great deal 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 (blade signs) oriented to a pedestrian scale of modest size
- More decorative or unique signs that are understated
- Signs that are located above the storefront (frieze or transom)
- Signage that helps to reinforce an identity
- 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 signage
- Pole mounted and off-site signs

