

Regional Design Guidelines for Downtowns

Clinton and Franklin Counties have engaged in an effort to leverage downtown revitalization in downtowns throughout the region. The existing built environment of downtowns and main streets in Clinton and Franklin Counties creates a character unique to each community which is vital to the economic success of each community and the region. As reinvestment in these historic downtowns occurs and revitalization of vacant buildings and underutilized properties occurs, it is important to consider key downtown design elements which can assist in maintaining that unique character while enhancing the built environment and the overall downtown experience.

The following regional design guidelines offer guidance for five (5) key design elements. The scale and applicability of these elements may vary from community to community. These guidelines are intended to offer best practices for small downtown environments. These guidelines do not take the place of applicable state and local regulations but instead are intended to guide communities, property owners and potential developers as projects are planned and designed for the rehabilitation of existing buildings, infill of vacant properties or façade improvements.

buildings orientation setbacks height

Buildings in a downtown setting often serve a mix of uses including residential, commercial, and office. Building uses in a historic downtown typically evolve over time to meet changing market demands. Regardless of the use, building orientation, setbacks and height can greatly impact the downtown experience.

orientation: Building fronts should face streets and be welcoming to pedestrians and visitors. Presenting the back of a building to the street ignores the pedestrian and creates a less interesting environment not conducive to an active downtown. The 'eyes on the street' created by buildings oriented to the street also provides a safer environment by continual informal surveillance by pedestrians and passersby.

setbacks: Buildings should be placed close to the street to create a continuous, active street wall within the downtown block while still allowing for sidewalk space. Parking should be placed in the rear of the site, behind the building. This approach enhances the pedestrian experience by creating a more humanized downtown feel and assists with traffic calming.

height: While building heights are likely regulated by local zoning, consideration should be given to the context of the surrounding buildings when considering height of an infill building. Height variety does create aesthetic diversity however, height context will ensure a cohesive downtown aesthetic that is respectful of any existing historic structures.



Commercial buildings of varying height oriented to the street and placed near the streets in Saranac Lake, NY.



storefronts visibility windows composition

Storefronts heighten the street experience. Full advantage should be taken of storefronts as the most valuable space in store. Storefronts should be designed with a range of architectural components and materials that fit within the context of the existing built environment and/or within the historic context of the downtown. The use of awnings and canopies provide an opportunity for signage and visual interest.

visibility: A transparent storefront welcomes customers by displaying services and products. It also reduces energy consumption by letting in natural light and enhances the curb appeal of the store and the downtown. To ensure visibility into active storefronts, it is recommended that 40-60 percent of the storefront wall area be transparent. Interior shelving should not interfere with the transparency of storefront windows.

windows & doors: Display windows and doors should align with upper story bays. Entrances should be recessed into the façade where feasible. Reflective glass, frosted materials or tinted glass should be discouraged.

upper façade windows materials

The upper façade should be an extension of the storefront architecture, so the building appears to be one entity.

windows: Upper story windows should be consistent with the scale and architectural style of the building. Windows should be vertical and arranged in an orderly manner. Sills and thresholds should be articulated.

materials & colors: Materials and colors for upper façade features, including awnings or canopies, should be complementary to the storefront treatment.



Transparent storefronts with awning and recessed entrance in Tupper Lake, NY. (Source: Tupper Lake Design Guidelines)



Upper façade windows arranged in a vertical, orderly alignment in Saranac Lake, NY.

signage scale materials lighting

Signage is an important aspect in every downtown or commercial center. Appropriately designed signage can enhance the pedestrian experience. However, signs should be integrated into the architectural design of a building and not interfere with adjacent buildings.

scale: Storefront signage in a downtown setting should be scaled and oriented for pedestrians. Signs should not overpower the building façade.

materials & placement: The color, size, shape and location of the sign should complement the building facade. Building elements including windows, cornices or decorative details should not be obscured.

lighting: Exterior spot lighting is encouraged but should respect Dark Sky principles. Neon signage should be discouraged.

site design circulation parking landscaping

Site design includes the physical elements of a project and is just as critical to a downtown experience as the architectural design of the building. While local zoning regulations might regulate site design, it is important to reinforce several key site design elements.

circulation: Circulation patterns within a site should be clear and safe. When designing a site layout, the circulation pattern should account for pedestrians, vehicles and deliveries.

parking: Parking should be placed to the side or rear of a parcel to allow the building to be placed near the street and oriented to the street.

landscaping: Landscaping should be used to visually break-up the hardscape, enhance the streetscape and provide valuable stormwater management functions when appropriate. Non-Native vegetation is discouraged.



Appropriately scaled signage and recessed entrance in Tupper Lake, NY.



Use of landscaping and plantings in a historic downtown arts district, Saratoga Springs, NY.