

Local Historic District Design Guidelines

City of Norwich, Connecticut



**Adopted by the Norwich Historic District Commission
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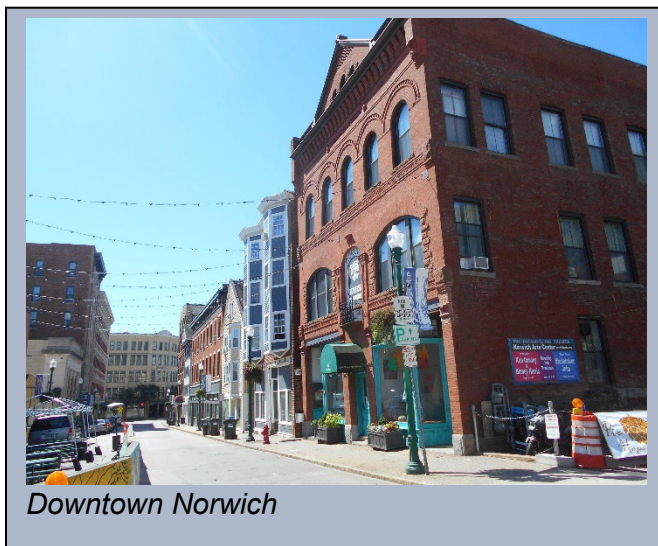


The Joseph Carpenter Silversmith Shop and Daniel Lathrop Schoolhouse in the Norwichtown Historic District.

Introduction

This guidebook has been prepared for property owners, architects, contractors, developers and anyone else interested in the local historic districts of Norwich. The Norwich Historic District Commission hopes this document will be a useful reference for you, explaining the procedures in the local historic districts and how our districts can remain unique, architecturally significant places, while still meeting our contemporary needs. For more information about the historic district commission, visit <https://www.norwichct.org/144/Historic-District-Commission>

The Architectural Significance of Norwich



Downtown Norwich

The city of Norwich has a rich human history, beginning with the Native Americans that called this area home for thousands of years. Everywhere we look, the landscape of Norwich has stories of its past to share with us. Below ground, invisible to our eyes, are the fragments of human occupation over the centuries. Above ground, buildings, structures, walls, monuments, burial grounds and even ruins share stories of a deep and rich history. Visit downtown Norwich and the maritime, commerce and industrial history of the city is very much on display. Walk around the green at

Norwichtown, and be taken back to the first European settlement in Norwich, 350 years ago. The buildings and landscapes of Norwich have stories to teach students and residents alike, from pre-European settlement, the growth of the colonies, the Revolutionary War and then right into the 20th Century, with the civil rights movement and other events of the more recent past. As our historic buildings have remained but found new uses, they continue to add new layers to the history of Norwich.

An Overview of the Local Historic Districts

In order to protect historic resources in Norwich, the Norwichtown and Little Plain Local Historic Districts were established by city ordinance during the 1960s. Over the decades, these local historic districts have done a remarkable job at making sure that these exceptional places remain intact. Other areas of Norwich have not fared so well. Alterations, demolitions and incompatible development have meant that some areas of Norwich are hardly recognizable, from even just a few decades ago.

Through a local historic district city ordinance, a municipality demonstrates its interest in protecting historic resources. Once established by the city, the local historic districts provide a method of protecting the overall character of an area by making sure changes

are compatible with the significant historic resources present. They do not stop change nor do they freeze a period in time. Local historic districts are all about making sure that our historic buildings remain part of our daily lives, guiding proposed changes.

The first local historic districts in the country were established in Charleston, South Carolina and New Orleans, Louisiana in the 1930s. In Connecticut, the first local historic district was established in Litchfield in 1959. Today, Connecticut has over 126 local historic districts in 72 cities and towns. Nearby local historic districts can be found in Groton, New London, Sterling, Ledyard and Colchester.

The purpose of a local historic district is not to thwart growth, but to allow for thoughtful consideration of change by having a locally appointed historic district commission review applications.

The Benefits of Local Historic Districts

The overarching benefit of a local historic district is the protection of significant buildings from demolition and inappropriate alteration. Local historic districts can be credited with saving the unique character of many areas of Connecticut. Local historic districts have offered residents, homeowners and business owners the opportunity to protect their communities and neighborhoods from destruction. The buildings remain part of the community, perhaps continuing as a home, a business, or perhaps adapting to a new use. As such they improve the quality of life for those living there, providing stability, pride in the neighborhood, a visual sense of the past and peace of mind that the historic environment will remain. Additional benefits of local historic districts may be economic in nature, increased tourism, additional interest in rehabilitation or educational opportunities for schoolchildren.

National Register Districts, State Register Districts and Local Historic Districts

There are three kinds of historic districts in Connecticut, National Register Districts, State Register Districts and Local Historic Districts. There are substantial differences between these designations. The National Register of Historic Places is a listing of buildings, structures, sites, objects, and districts significant in our nation's history, culture, architecture or archeology and that are worthy of preservation. It is a federal designation, from the Secretary of the Interior and the National Park Service. Listing in the National Register provides formal recognition of the property's significance, potential tax incentives for owners of income-producing property, and very limited protection from federally funded, licensed, or assisted projects. More information on how federally involved projects are reviewed can be found on the website of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. In short, the National Register of Historic Places is essentially an honorary designation.

State Register Districts are part of the State Register of Historic Places, Connecticut's official listing of structures and sites that characterize the historical development of the state. Like National Register Districts, State Register Districts are essentially an honorary designation.

A local historic district, on the other hand, is established locally through a 2/3s affirmative vote of the property owners and a subsequent city council vote. It provides a review process for changes to exterior architectural features visible from a public way. Norwichtown and Little Plain are both local historic districts and national register districts. With the review protections of the local historic district ordinance, portions of Norwichtown and Little Plain are well protected from loss.

Unfortunately, most of Norwich, even including the National Register Districts, are not well protected from alterations and demolitions.

Through the local democratic process, the local historic district ordinance in Norwich can always be expanded to protect additional significant, yet vulnerable, areas of Norwich.



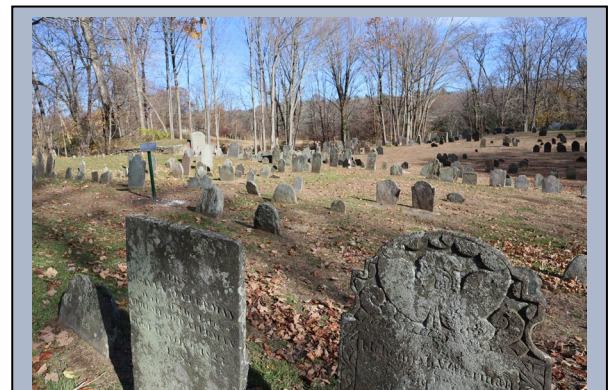
Taftville is a National Register District, not a local historic district. It does not have the protections of a local historic district.

Local Historic Districts of the City of Norwich

- Little Plain Local Historic District
- Norwichtown Local Historic District

National Register Districts of the City of Norwich

- Bean Hill Historic District
- Chelsea Parade Historic District
- Downtown Norwich Historic District
- Greeneville Historic District
- Jail Hill Historic District
- Laurel Hill Historic District
- Little Plain Local Historic District
- Norwich State Hospital Historic District
- Norwichtown Local Historic District
- Taftville/Ponemah Mill Historic District
- Yantic Falls Historic District



Old Norwichtown Burying Ground, part of the Norwichtown Historic District

The Benefits of Design Guidelines

Local historic district design guidelines are appreciated by the historic district commission members themselves but especially by architects, developers, contractors, business owners and homeowners. Design guidelines help get everyone onto the same page, clearly explaining the types of projects that are likely to be approved in the local historic district or not approved. Anyone applying for a Certificate of Appropriateness in the Norwichtown or Little Plain Local Historic districts will benefit by familiarizing themselves with these guidelines.

They are here to make the application process go smoothly and quickly.

Updates to these Guidelines

These guidelines are meant to be updated. It is anticipated that the Norwich Historic District Commission will review these guidelines regularly, clarifying sections, adding sections, responding to input and making sure they remain relevant and useful. The Historic District Commission always welcomes thoughts from property owners, business owners, architects, contractors and developers on these guidelines.

Character Defining Features

Throughout these guidelines, the term, character defining features, will be used frequently. Character defining features are those distinguishing elements of a building, structure or landscape, that convey significance. An original doorway, window or porch could be a character defining feature as could many other elements of a building. Each historic building in the districts has character defining features in the materials, craftsmanship, forms and detail present. The goal of a local historic district is to provide a review process that will help to preserve the character defining features of the area.



The exceptional design of the shutters on the Joseph Carpenter Silversmith Shop are an example of character defining features on this building.

Secretary of the Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties

The development of these guidelines began with the Secretary of the Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. These are generalized, national standards that provide a foundation for best preservation practices around the country. While there are

Additions



Overview

Many of the buildings within the Norwichtown and Little Plain Historic Districts have grown larger over time as additional space was needed. These additions are significant aspects of the buildings themselves, providing information about how a building evolved over time. Historically, additions onto historic buildings have often resulted in wings to the left or right of a façade or an ell, located at the rear of the property. Typically, these additions were smaller, or subordinate, to the main building form and often stepped back. This keeps the main façade of the building as the focal point from the public way. Today, additions may still be needed by people and businesses in the districts. There are many ways that additions can be accommodated within the districts while still making sure

that significant historic properties are not irreparably harmed.

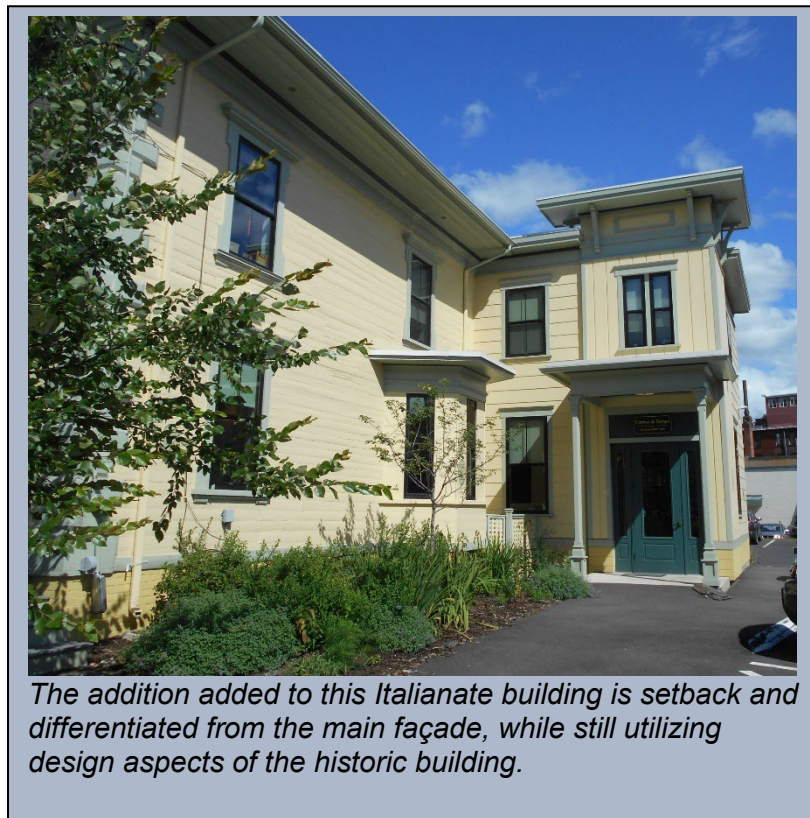
Things to Consider

If you are hiring a design professional for your addition, it is best to find a designer with a sensitivity to historic buildings and a background in historic preservation. The challenge is designing an addition that is clearly distinguished from the historic building yet remains compatible to the historic building attached to it. Before starting, a review of the character defining features found on the historic building is important. The idea is not to mimic what is seen on the historic building. Rather, the goal is to base the start of what is designed for an addition by what is already there.

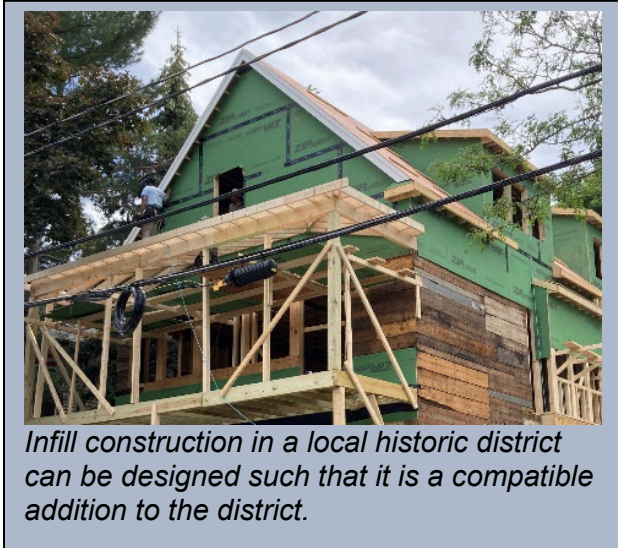
Guidelines

1. Differentiate the addition from the historic building.
2. Design the addition so that it will remain subordinate to the historic building.
3. Locate the addition to rear of the building if possible.
4. Design an addition to the rear of the building that is smaller in volume and does not rise above the main façade.
5. Locate an addition on a side of the building if the rear is not a possibility.

6. Design an addition on a side of the building with breaks in the roofline, stepped back from the façade and with less volume.
7. Design an addition so that it will not damage or obscure the character defining features of the historic building.
8. Design an addition so that it will be compatible with the historic building and buildings in the vicinity.
9. Choose exterior surface materials that are compatible with the historic building.
10. Design the addition so that if it were to be removed in the future it would not damage character defining features.
11. Review the new construction design principles and architectural materials sections of these guidelines for more information.



New Construction



Infill construction in a local historic district can be designed such that it is a compatible addition to the district.

Overview

The addition of new construction in a local historic district can improve the vitality of the area. Additional homes or businesses provide needed housing or nearby services, all within a walkable, historic community. Particularly if there are vacant lots or gaps, new construction can fill in those holes and bring a visual harmony to the streetscape. The challenge with new construction is to design in such a way that it is well-suited to the setting of a significant historic area. The goal of the historic district commission is to approve compatible new construction while making sure that the historic

character and setting of the local historic districts is not compromised.

Things to Consider

The historic district commission does not specify certain architectural styles or designs for new construction.

If you are hiring a design professional for your new construction, it is best to find a designer with a sensitivity to historic buildings. The idea is not to mimic the nearby architectural styles. The new construction should be distinguishable from its neighboring historic properties. The goal is to base the start of what is designed for new construction on what is already there.

Guidelines

1. Design new construction to be compatible with nearby historic buildings
2. Review the guidelines that are part of the new construction design principles.



When not carefully designed with the historic character of the area, new construction can have a dramatic and negative impact on an entire streetscape.

New Construction Design Principles

Incorporating stand-alone new construction sensitively into a collection of significant historic resources can be challenging. Yet, there are many successful examples that can be found. Successful new construction in local historic districts takes into account all of these design principles. They are a good place to start in the design process.

Siting

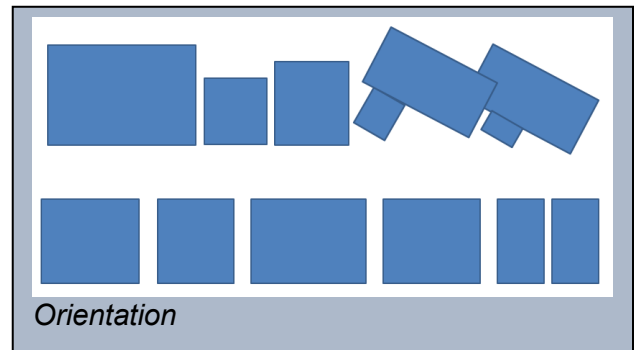
Siting is where the new building is located on the vacant property.

Site the new construction to be compatible with nearby properties.

Orientation

Orientation is the positioning of the new building to surrounding buildings.

Position the new building to be compatible with surrounding buildings.



Scale

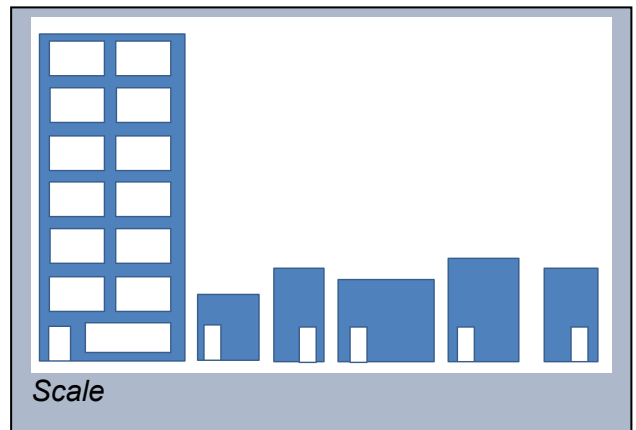
Scale is the relationship of the new construction to surrounding buildings.

Maintain a similar scale to surrounding buildings.

Massing

Massing is the volume of new building.

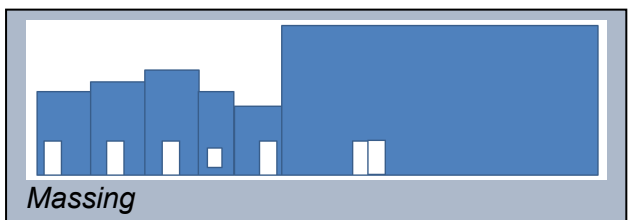
Maintain a similar massing to surrounding buildings.



Rhythm

The relationship between various elements on a building that creates an overall sense of organization and harmony.

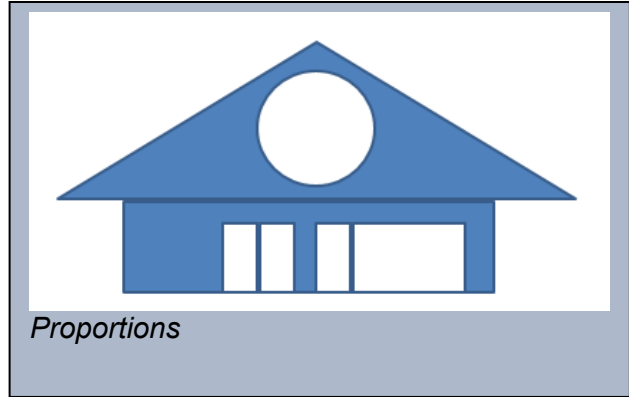
Maintain a rhythm to the various elements of the new construction.



Proportion

The relationship of the size of architectural elements on a particular building.

Maintain proportions on the new construction that are compatible to nearby properties.



Materials

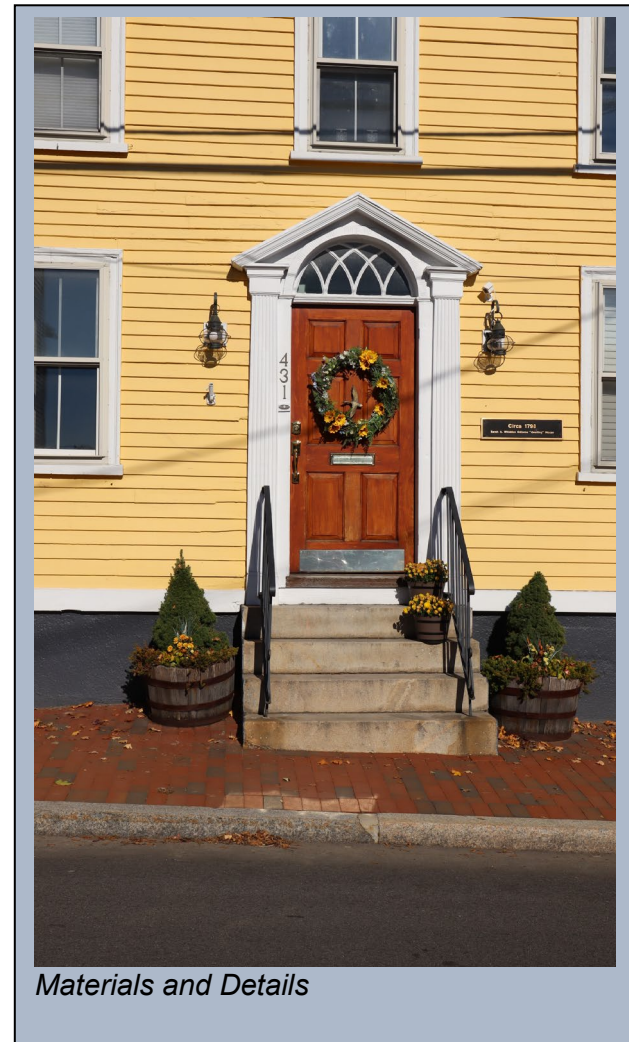
The components of the new construction such as wood, metal, stone, masonry, synthetic materials or others.

Choose traditional materials found on the exteriors of nearby buildings. Alternative materials will be considered if minimally visible from the public way.

Details

The specifics of new construction, such as wall cladding and trim, that include their arrangement, texture, color, size and shape.

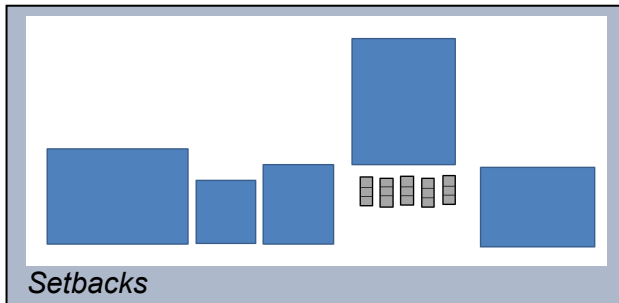
Select architectural details that are compatible with nearby historic buildings.



Setbacks

The distance the building is from the roadway is the front setback. Side setbacks relate to the property on either side of the proposed building.

Site new buildings to align with the common front setback.





If new construction was proposed on this residential street, compatibility with the existing setbacks would need to be considered.