

**Lowell Historic Board
Acre Neighborhood District
Design Review Standards
(10/13/99)**

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1. PURPOSES

- 1.1 A “neighborhood district” is an area with definable boundaries designated by the city as containing buildings, streetscapes, physical features and improvements or both, which are of historical, social, cultural, architectural or aesthetic significance to the city, and thereby constitute a distinct neighborhood within the city. Section 9 of the Lowell Historic Board’s special act allows for the creation of “neighborhood districts,” or local districts within the City other than the Downtown Lowell Historic District (See guidelines and procedures under P.L. 95-290 and Chapter 566 of the Acts of 1983). The Lowell City Council voted to create the Acre Neighborhood District on October 12, 1999.
- 1.2 The purpose of the Standards is to guide rehabilitation and construction in the Acre Neighborhood District to ensure that development is consistent with the architectural and physical character of the District and the goals of the Acre Urban Revitalization and Development Plan approved by the Lowell City Council on June 8, 1999.
- 1.3 The Standards are intended to ensure that properties in the District are not altered inappropriately and that new construction compliments the area’s existing character.
- 1.4 The goal is to minimize reliance on the individual tastes and preferences of the party(ies) awarding permits and proposing projects, and to establish rules which are easily interpreted and universally applicable in all situations.

2. EXISTING STRUCTURES

2.1 Removal of Structures

2.10 Demolition

- 2.101 Buildings proposed for demolition as part of the approved Acre Urban Revitalization and Development Plan will receive an automatic Certificate of Nonapplicability (approval) from the Board.
- 2.102 There will be a presumption toward retaining all existing buildings in the District that are located within the boundaries of the Lowell National Historical Park and Preservation District except those rated “D” in the Index of the document entitled “Details of the Preservation Plan,” published by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission (available from the Historic Board Administrator) with the exception of those buildings falling under Section 2.101.

- 2.103 For those buildings located in the District but outside of the Lowell National Historical Park and Preservation District, there will be a presumption toward retaining all existing buildings that have Massachusetts Historical Commission survey forms completed for them with the exception of those buildings falling under Section 2.101.
- 2.104 With the exception of those buildings falling under Section 2.101, demolition shall be allowed only when the new construction relates better to the District than does the existing building, and when all the other requirements below are satisfied.
- 2.1021 A prerequisite for demolition shall be an application for Certificate of Economic Hardship, which shall contain a financial report detailing the costs of rehabilitation, and evidencing that the existing building is incapable of producing a reasonable economic return on the investment. The maximum rate of return, which is theoretically possible on the land, with new buildings, shall not constitute such evidence, if the existing buildings can generate a reasonable return (See Appendix).
- 2.1022 If an applicant's request for permission to demolish a structure or part of a structure is based upon structural instability or advanced deterioration, a technical report prepared by an architect or professional engineer registered in Massachusetts shall be submitted, detailing the nature and extent of the specific problems, and providing reasonably accurate cost estimates for their correction.
- 2.1023 Applications for permission to demolish existing structures shall be accomplished by complete plans for the new development proposed on the site, together with a timetable and a budget for both the demolition and the reconstruction, as well as satisfactory evidence that adequate financing is available.
- 2.1024 A standard condition of approval for demolition shall be the documentation of the building's elevations through photographs.
- 2.1025 Where public safety needs require the removal of part of a building or complex, for example to enable access by fire-fighting equipment, the Board may allow limited removal of structurally-sound construction. The extent of removal shall be the smallest necessary to permit the delivery of essential public safety services, and shall generally not exceed 5% of the floor space of the building or complex.

2.11 Relocation

2.111 Buildings shall be retained on their present sites whenever possible. Relocation shall be considered only as an alternative to demolition. Standards 2.1021, 2.1023, and 2.1024 above shall apply.

2.112 Buildings shall be relocated only to sites where they would be compatible with the architectural, cultural and landscape surroundings and reestablish continuity within their streetscapes.

2.2 Minimum Maintenance

2.20 Owners of all buildings shall provide sufficient maintenance to prevent the deterioration of their buildings in accordance with the City of Lowell's Minimum Maintenance Ordinance.

2.3 Changes to Structures

2.30 General Principles

2.301 Architectural Character

2.3011 The architectural character of each building shall be maintained or restored. Buildings shall be rehabilitated to reveal their historic materials and details. Missing architectural elements shall be recreated wherever feasible. Significant existing materials shall be retained wherever possible, by stabilizing, repairing or matching them with compatible new materials as required.

2.3012 The architectural character of each historic period is made up of several key factors. Each period interpreted these design elements in its own characteristic fashion. These factors or elements are:

Scale – relationship to human size, form and percept

Rhythm – the pattern of repeating elements such as windows, columns, arches and other façade elements

Form – overall shapes, combinations of shapes as seen from different perspectives, skylines and contours

Massing – height, setback and major dimensions

Proportion – the relationship among the dimensions of various elements

Features – building elements such as windows, doors, cornices, roofs, and decorative trim

Materials – the “skin” of each building, consisting traditionally of brick, cast iron, steel, sheet metal, wood, glass, terra cotta, and slate.

2.302 Commercial Streets

2.3021 The integrity of the District’s commercial streets shall be protected against non-commercial designs at street level, through sensitive rehabilitation and new construction that provides a continuity of shops along the street frontages.

2.303 Residential Buildings

2.3031 The vitality of the District’s residential streets shall be enhanced by restoring and preserving residential buildings while respecting the historic character created by the various architectural features defining roof and façade.

2.31 Materials and Colors

2.311 Masonry: Masonry shall be returned to a serviceable and visually acceptable state by replacing missing masonry units and mortar with matching elements, and repointing and stabilizing using proper techniques and materials. Cleaning shall be accomplished using the gentlest effective means possible, so as not to damage either the masonry unit or the mortar joints.

2.312 Wood: Missing or deteriorated wooden features shall be sensitively replaced with new wood milled to match the original elements, and existing features shall be repaired wherever necessary.

2.313 Metals: Missing or deteriorated architectural metals shall be replaced with original or substitute metal fabrications or other visually compatible and durable features manufactured from acceptable alternative materials.

2.314 Colors: Architectural features shall be restored with colors and finishes appropriate to the nature of the materials and to the character of the original building.

2.315 Other: Where glass, plastic and/or aluminum architectural elements are an integral part of a building’s original design, and where this design is deemed to be of a high aesthetic quality, consideration shall be given to preservation of these elements.

2.32 Major Building Elements

- 2.321 Storefronts: Existing historic storefronts shall be retained and rehabilitated. Generally, the term “historic” in these standards shall refer to the appearance of the building fifty or more years ago. Storefronts which have been altered or removed shall be restored or compatibly redesigned. Research must be done to discover each storefront’s original appearance, and to learn what architectural features might be covered by existing siding or facing materials.
- 2.322 Doors: Existing historic doors shall be retained and rehabilitated wherever possible. Where doorways must be altered to meet current building code and safety requirements, doors and entranceways shall be designed also to respect the exterior architectural integrity of the building.
- 2.322 Windows: Existing windows shall be retained and repaired to improve thermal efficiency wherever possible. Where replacement is essential, new windows shall match the originals or be in character with the building. The original window type (hung sash, casement, pivot, awning, etc.) shall be retained as shall be the appearance of the individual lights of glass formed by the muntin grid. The original width and depth of the individual elements (such as exterior molding and /or casing, exterior frame, exterior sash members, and exterior muntin) shall be reproduced or be closely approximated. If storm windows are to be used, they shall be applied from the interior. Replacement windows shall be of the same size as the historic windows, fill the entire window opening and be recessed in the opening the same depth as the historic window. Windows of completely different design on elevations not in public view (on alleys or in areaways) may be considered.
- 2.323 Roofs: Features which give the roof its essential historical character shall be preserved or restored to the extent that it is visible from the ground. The principal considerations include the original roof shape; original roofing materials or materials compatible with the old in composition, size, shape, color and texture; and architectural details such as dormer, windows, cupolas, cornices, brackets, chimneys, cresting, and weather vanes.
- 2.324 Mechanical Equipment: Essential outdoor mechanical equipment (ducts, fans, solar panels, etc.) shall be installed in locations which create the least disturbance to the historical appearance of the building, and which involve the minimum alteration to its structural integrity.

3. NEW CONSTRUCTION

3.1 General Principles

Under these guidelines, principal facades of new buildings shall be held to high standards of conformity throughout the district. New buildings and structures visible from the streetscape should be compatible with the established rhythm of existing buildings, both on the same and opposite sides of the street. Height, scale, massing, setback, proportions and rhythm of new

buildings should be in conformance with those of existing buildings. If differences must occur because of proposed use, the new building should be complimentary to existing structures. New additions to existing buildings should also be visually compatible in scale, materials, and texture, although not identical in appearance.

New construction on currently vacant sites shall be encouraged to reflect the Acre's traditional character, embodied in the compactness and variation of its building types.

3.10 Continuity:

3.101 Free-standing Structures

Free-standing buildings shall respect the continuity of their streetscape, being in conformance with the existing rhythm, height, scale, setback, proportions and massing of existing structures.

Major sites shall at all times respect the continuity of nearby streetscapes, being in conformance with the existing rhythm, height, scale, setback, proportions and massing of existing buildings and structures.

3.102 Continuous Structures

New buildings should not be designed as free-standing structures where the

existing structures along a streetscape are continuous and hold the lines of a street or canal. In such locations, new additions designed to be compatible with existing structures shall directly abut those, and be continuous with the reliefs of their facades, and heights and rhythms of their rooflines.

3.11 Ground-Level Design: On commercial streets, ground-level building design shall generally follow existing patterns created by the type and scale of shops, street facades, sign design, shop window configurations, and materials traditional to the Acre's character.

3.12 Materials: New buildings shall utilize exterior materials in keeping with the exteriors seen in the District, with natural materials being encouraged. Colors shall generally be compatible with the surrounding streetscape.

3.13 Contemporary Approaches: New buildings shall generally utilize contemporary design ideas, but shall also respect and reflect the traditional scale, proportions and massing of historic structures.

3.14 Directional Expression: Strong horizontal designs shall be avoided through the division of continuous long horizontal facades into smaller vertically-oriented units which conform to the primary expression of the streetscape. Overly vertical motifs or exaggerated expression in any direction shall be avoided.

3.2 Infill Structures

- 3.20 Definition: New construction sites are considered “infill” if they cover less than one quarter the area of a city block and/or less than half of the frontage of a city block.
- 3.21 Harmony: Infill structures must blend in with the existing architectural fabric as seen from the street, and reinforce the feeling of continuity rather than stand out individually. The “General Principles” contained in Section 3.1 above shall also apply to infill structures.
- 3.22 Height: Infill structures shall generally contain at least two stories above street level, and be consistent with the height of the immediately adjacent buildings.
- 3.23 Setback: Infill structures shall generally continue the street setback parameters established by adjacent buildings.
- 3.24 Roofs: Infill structures shall generally not introduce new roof shapes, pitches or colors not found on traditional buildings located on the same block. Roof dormers and cupolas shall be permitted only in locations above the continuous roofline established along a streetscape.
- 3.25 Wall Openings: Infill structures shall respect the alternation of window area to wall area, and the width-to-height ratio of windows and doors, in the facades of adjacent structures. Introducing incompatible façade patterns that upset the rhythm of openings established in historic buildings in the immediate area shall be avoided. The enclosure of porches and other covered areas on principal facades is discouraged, and if permitted at all must result in high compatibility with existing structures along the streetscape.

3.3 Major Sites

- 3.30 Definition: Major sites are those which cover more than one-quarter the area of a city block and/or more than half the frontage of a city block, or sites located on blocks without any historic structures (i.e., those rated “A”, “B”, or “C” on the Index of Properties).
- 3.31 Basic Approach: New construction shall generally recreate the Acre’s traditional mix of free-standing residential units with ground-floor commercial storefronts historically found in residential areas or residential/commercial areas, and large-scale industrial buildings in historically industrial areas.
- 3.310 Parking Lots: Parking lots shall be located behind new and existing structures to the greatest possible extent, so as not to be visible from streets and canals. Innovative uses of existing courtyard and interior spaces to accommodate increased parking needs, especially in and around mill buildings, shall be encouraged. Plans for

such parking facilities must be carefully and thoughtfully executed by or with assistance of an accredited architect. Ground level parking spaces shall be adequately landscaped using a combination of shade trees, shrubs, and or hardscape materials.

3.2 Height: Height control is critical along street and canal frontages, and at the axis of major street vistas. New construction along the canals bordering the district on the southern and eastern boundaries shall be subject to the most stringent review. In general, buildings in such area, within commercial or industrial districts shall generally be between two and three stories (or 25 to 40 feet) in height. Shadow and wind impacts are particularly important in active public pedestrian area.

3.3 Other: The “General Principles” contained in Section 3.1 above shall also apply to major new construction.

4. SIGNAGE

4.1 General

4.10 All new signs, and all changes in the appearance of existing signs displayed so as to be visible from streets, sidewalks, alleys, or canals, require a Historic Permit. This includes changes in message or colors on pre-existing signs.

4.11 If there is a conflict between these standards and the requirements in the City Sign Code, the stricter shall apply. These standards shall also be supplemented by the text of the Lowell Sign Book, which are incorporated herein by reference.

4.12 Off-premise advertising signs shall be prohibited, but off-premise sign directory boards may be permitted in certain locations where visibility is a significant problem (such as within a millyard, or along a dead-end street, for example), where they can be harmoniously integrated.

4.2 Location and Size of Signs

4.20 Signs must not dominate buildings facades or obscure their architectural features (arches, transom panels, sills, moldings, cornice, windows, etc.,).

4.21 The size of signs and individual letters shall be an appropriate scale for pedestrians and slow-moving traffic. Projecting signs shall generally not exceed nine square feet, on first floor level.

4.22 Signs on adjacent storefronts should be coordinated in height and proportion. The use of a continuous sign-band extending over adjacent shops within the same building is encouraged, as a unifying element.

- 4.23 Portable signs located on sidewalks, driveways or in parking lots are strongly discouraged, and shall generally be prohibited unless there is no other reasonable means to convey the information (such as on windows, walls or on permanent sign posts).
- 4.24 Wall signs shall generally be located no higher than the window sill line of the second story.
- 4.25 Signs displayed during business hours only, such as those which are removed every evening and displayed again the following morning, constitute an on-going advertising format and shall be construed as being permanent signs rather than temporary signs, if such display continues for more than thirty calendar days. The date when such sign was first displayed shall be affixed to the sign so as to be readily seen.

4.3 Messages and Lettering Signs

- 4.30 Messages should be as simple and brief as possible. The use of pictorial symbols or logos is encouraged.
- 4.31 Lettering should be of a traditional block or curvilinear style which is easy to read and not incompatible with the style of the building. No more than two different styles should be used on the same sign.
- 4.32 Letters shall be carefully formed and properly spaced, to be neat and uncluttered. Generally, no more than 60% of the total sign area shall be occupied by lettering.
- 4.33 Lettering shall generally be flat or raised (rather than incised, which represents an earlier era predating Lowell).

4.4 Color

- 4.40 Light-colored letters on a dark-colored background are generally required, as being more traditional and visually less intrusive in the context of Lowell's predominantly red-brick streetscapes.
- 4.41 Colors should be chosen to complement, not clash, with the façade color of the building. Signs should normally contain not more than three different colors.

4.5 Materials and Illumination

- 4.50 The use of durable traditional materials, is strongly encouraged (metal and wood). All new signs shall be prepared in a professional manner. Paper signs for advertising or identification purposes shall be allowed for not more than 30 days, as temporary signage, and shall not be attached directly to the glass. The date on which a paper sign was first displayed shall be written on the sign, so-as to be readily seen.

- 4.51 In general, any illumination used shall be external, non-flashing, and glareless.
- 4.52 Internal illumination is generally discouraged, but it may be appropriate in certain circumstances, such as:
 - 4.521 individual back-lit letters which are silhouetted against a softly illuminated wall.
 - 4.522 individual letters with translucent faces, containing soft lighting elements inside each letter, and
 - 4.523 metal-faced box signs with cut-out letters and soft-glow fluorescent tubes.

However, such signs are generally suitable only on contemporary buildings.

- 4.53 Neon signs may be permitted in exceptional cases where they are custom-designed to be compatible with the building's historic and architectural character.

4.6 Other Stylistic Points

- 4.60 The shape of a projecting sign shall not be incompatible with the period of the building to which it is affixed, and shall harmonize with the lettering and symbols chosen for it.
- 4.61 Supporting brackets for projecting signs should complement the sign design, and not overwhelm or clash with it. They must be adequately engineered to support the intended load, and generally should conform to a 2:3 vertical-horizontal proportion. Screw holes must be drilled at points where the fasteners will enter masonry joints, to avoid damaging bricks, etc.

5. OTHER DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Pedestrian Amenities

- 5.10 While pedestrian amenities must be compatible with the City's historic character, variations shall be permitted in order to respect the vitality and the variety of the City's different thoroughfares and neighborhoods.
- 5.11 Different typed of public spaces should respond to the following general performance criteria:

Commercial streets shall be treated simply with maximum open sidewalk space, minimal obstruction on the ground and pedestrian preference for street crossing.

Historic, Non-Commercial Pedestrian Streets and Walks shall have a smaller scale, more intimate design using textures and smaller elements that stimulate interest along the path.

Parking areas must be carefully designed and landscaped due to their large size and first-impression impact upon visitors.

Parks should play a special role in historic interpretation and provide day-time cultural activity for the District as well as relief from paved areas.

5.2 Streetscape

5.20 Paving and Planting

5.201 The existing streetscape should be enriched, especially around historic buildings and heavily used pedestrian areas. Historically appropriate improvements should create some consistency while avoiding complete uniformity.

5.201 Historic paving features shall be retained wherever possible and incorporated into the streetscape improvements.

5.203 Subtle variations in paving patterns and materials shall be used to enrich sidewalks and plazas, such as by highlighting patterns in streetlights, trees, furniture, street crossings, and entryways.

5.204 Planting shade trees and shrubs shall be encouraged where they would enhance the historic character or create more inviting spaces. Removal of healthy trees over 3” in diameter, measured four feet above ground level, shall be discouraged, except where they threaten existing structures and canal walls.

5.21 Street Furniture

5.211 Placement of street furniture which is appropriate to the context, attractive, and durable shall be encouraged. Placement of furniture shall be based upon careful study of how people tend to use a street.

5.22 Lights, Signs, and Traffic Signals

5.221 Public signs shall utilize compatible graphics, colors, proportions,

dimensions, and fabrication methods, in order to create greater consistency and improve their compatibility with their historic setting.

5.222 Street lights shall be designed to harmonize with their surroundings, and traffic signal poles and mounts shall be as unobtrusive as possible, both physically and visually.

5.3 Transportation Facilities

5.30 Parking

5.301 Where off-street parking provision is necessary, vehicles shall be accommodated in multi-story structures, which are sensitively designed to fit into their architectural context. Removal of buildings to create ground-level parking space shall generally be prohibited.

5.302 Ground level parking spaces proposed to be located on existing open land shall be adequately landscaped utilizing a combination of shade trees and shrubs for screening.

5.31 Transit Shelters

5.311 The design of transit shelters at bus stops shall provide visual focal points, and contemporary approaches that integrate well with the historic setting shall be encouraged.

5.4 Open Space

5.40 Urban Parks

5.401 Existing parks shall be preserved and enhanced.

5.402 The removal of existing structures to create new parks shall be discouraged, in order to protect the urban scale and texture of the downtown historic district.

5.5 Fencing and Screening

5.50 Fencing

5.501 Fences not used for visual screening shall be designed to harmonize with various types, traditional metal railings (such as around parks and along canals).

5.51 Screening

5.511 Outdoor storage area and other uses which are to be screened from view shall be enclosed with an opaque fence or wall built of traditional materials (such as wood or brick) in a manner which is not inconsistent with the historic character of the district.

6. WAIVERS

6.1 Where the Board finds that extraordinary and unnecessary hardships may result from strict compliance with these standards, or where these are exceptional circumstances, it may vary these standards so that substantial justice may be done. In order to issue a waiver, a majority of at least six members shall make specific factual findings demonstrating that:

6.10 Strict application of the standards would be inappropriate due to particular circumstances pertaining to the property, and

6.11 Such waiver would not violate the spirit of the standards or the Acre Neighborhood Revitalization and Development Plan and would be consistent with the intent to protect the Acre's character.

6.1.1 In granting waivers, the Board may require such conditions as will, in its judgment, secure substantially the objectives of the standards, which have been waived.

APPENDIX: DETERMINATION OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

Application for a Certificate of Economic Hardship shall be made on a form prepared by the Board. The Board shall schedule a public hearing concerning the application and any person may testify at the hearing concerning economic hardship.

The Board may solicit expert testimony or require that the applicant for a Certificate of Economic Hardship make submissions concerning any or all of the following information before it makes a determination on the application.

1. Professional estimate of the cost of the proposed construction, alteration, demolition, or removal and an estimate of any additional cost that would be incurred to comply with the standards of the Board for changes necessary for the issuance of a Historic Permit.
2. A report from a licensed engineer or architect with experience in rehabilitation as to the structural soundness of any structures on the property and their suitability or rehabilitation.

3. Estimated market value of the property in its current condition; after completion of the proposed construction, alteration, demolition, or removal; after any changes required by the Board; and, in the case of a proposed demolition, after renovation of the existing property for continued use.
4. In the case of a proposed demolition, an estimate from an architect, developer, real estate consultant, appraiser, or other real estate professional experienced in rehabilitation as to the economic feasibility of rehabilitation or reuse of the existing structure on the property.
5. Amount paid for the property, the date of purchase, and the party from whom purchased, including a description of the relationship, if any, between the owner of record or applicant and the person from whom the property was purchased, and any terms of financing between seller and buyer.
6. If the property is income-producing, the annual gross income from the property for the previous two years; itemized operation and maintenance expenses for the previous two years; and depreciation deduction and annual cash flow before and after debt service, if any, during the same period.
7. Remaining balance on any mortgage or other financing secured by the property and annual debt service, if any, for the previous two years.
8. All appraisals obtained within the previous two years by the owner or applicant in connection with the purchase, financing or ownership of the property.
9. Any listing of the property for sale or rent, priced asked, and others received, if any, within the previous two years.
10. Assessed value of the property according to the two most recent assessments:
11. Real Estate taxes for the previous two years:
12. Form of ownership or operation of the property, whether sole property, whether sole proprietorship, for-profit or not-for-profit incorporating limited partnership, joint venture, or other.

