

Design for Context & Tradition



In February 2016, the Aspen City Council adopted a one-year moratorium on commercial development. The purpose of the moratorium was to enable open conversation about potential regulatory changes to better align with the community's master plan, the Aspen Area Community Plan (AAP). One of the focal points of the changes was the design of commercial buildings. Aspen adopted city-wide commercial design guidelines in 2007 and has successfully used them for almost a decade. However, a series of recent projects led Council to believe that the existing document did not always result in development that reflected the community's heritage and values.

The City hired two local architecture and planning firms to assist in a rework of the commercial design guidelines. The scope of work focused on using the framework of the existing guidelines as a starting point, but rewriting them to better reflect development compatible with Aspen's historic development pattern, newer zoning requirements, and AAP policies.



The process began with extensive public outreach

to gain an understanding of what the community felt was appropriate design. In addition to traditional outreach methods such as focus groups, surveys, and open houses, City staff also utilized more unique methods including pop-up interactive booths, an outdoor chalkboard forum, and staff-guided walking tours to diversify the responses and conversations around design.

The public outreach responses led to three very important conclusions, which helped to shape the new document:

1. new development should complement and reflect (but not imitate) historic development
2. new development needs more usable outdoor amenity space
3. the guidelines need to be more enforceable

The overall intent of the new guidelines document was to address these three concerns. While several design guidelines across the country focus more on trying to create a predictable outcome, Aspen's new document encourages designers to pull inspiration from neighborhood history, creative development examples, and local traditions through flexible guidelines for distinct Character Areas. An entire chapter is focused on creating appropriate and varied outdoor amenity spaces that help reduce the scale of buildings while encouraging vitality and interaction with the public realm. The new document adds a select number of required design "standards" in addition to the flexible guidelines to introduce a higher level of enforceability and accountability for a design project. In addition to these changes, the document was completely redesigned to be more streamlined, graphically compelling, and

user-friendly.

Building Proportion, Scale, Height and Width

More than half of the properties within the Main Street Historic District are designated 19th century landmarks that are one to two stories and 1,000 to 2,200 square feet in size. The maximum perceived mass of new buildings or remodels within the Main Street Historic District should reflect this character by creating detached buildings on a property or through one building that is clearly broken up into distinguishable modules using connecting elements, material changes, or roof forms, for example.

3.4 Construct a new building to appear similar in scale and proportion with the historic buildings in the district.

- Subdivide larger masses into smaller modules that are similar in size to the historic buildings in the historic district.
- Reflect the heights and proportions that characterize the historic district.
- Use secondary structures to break up mass of buildings. These are most appropriately located along alleyways.

3.5 Roof forms should be in character with surrounding historic buildings.

- Roof forms should be simple.
- If applicable, gable ends should be oriented toward the street.
- Carefully consider roof eaves, orientation of ridgelines, roof pitch, dormers, and other features as a way to either create compatibility or differentiate a new building or addition.

3.6 Design a front elevation to be similar in scale to historic buildings in the district.

- The primary plane of the front elevation should not appear taller than historic structures.

3.7 Clearly define the primary entrance to a new building with a front porch or similar feature.

- The front porch should be functional, and used as the means of access to the front door.
- A new porch should be similar in size and shape to those seen traditionally.

3.8 Design an addition to be compatible in size and scale with the main building.

- An addition that is lower, or similar in height to the existing building, is preferred.

3.9 When planning an addition to a building in a historic district, preserve historic alignments on the street.

- Some roof lines and porch eaves on historic buildings may align at approximately the same height.
- An addition should not be placed in a location where these relationships would be altered or obscured.
- Detach building mass along alleyways, similar to the pattern of traditional shed development.

The perception of mass can change with the material used.

Roof forms shall be in character with surrounding historic buildings.

New buildings should appear similar in scale to historic buildings in the district.

Front elevations are typically rearticulated in form and articulation.

The Mow Store building is an example of a false storefront.

Maintain relationships of gable and sheekles.

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The new document was adopted by City Council in January 2017. In the short period of time the new design document has been in use, it has led to more informed conversations about design in Aspen that will ultimately result in projects that more truly reflect the rich history and strong values of the community in the AACF. Both the Commercial Design Guidelines and Standards and AACF can be found at: www.cityofaspen.com/Departments/Community-Development