Developing Downtown Design Guidelines

by Janice Pregliasco, A.I.A.

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California Main Street Program

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Before You Begin

Design guidelines are recommendations for the improvement of visual quality. They are an analysis of what is special about an area, developed into a plan toward enhancing those qualities. Guidelines are:

- flexible, otherwise they promote excessive conformity;
- a result of public participation, or the community will not accept them;
- an identification of the most characteristic design elements;
- minimum standards of compatibility.

Many small communities are adopting downtown design guidelines as a way to halt visual deterioration and protect the special identity of their commercial cores. For guidelines to be successful, to be used and supported, the nature of this revitalization tool needs to be understood.

Design guidelines can:

- Improve the quality of physical changes
- Protect the value of investment
- Protect existing architectural character
- Act as a base for objective decision-making
- Increase public awareness of architectural quality
- Prevent incompatible new construction

Design guidelines cannot:

- regulate growth
- control non-exterior changes
- guarantee good design
- be law

The constitutionality of local design guidelines has been upheld by the United States Supreme Court in Penn Central v. City of New York (1978). The court found that *"...standards, controls, and incentives that will encourage preservation by private owners"* were a function of local

government, and that *"the restrictions imposed are substantially related to the promotion of the general welfare...."* Another legal term, the *"tout ensemble"* principle, maintains that all property in a district may be regulated in order to preserve the character of the area.

Guidelines are not an immediate revitalization tool. The need for guidelines evolves out of early experience in a revitalization effort, after some positive physical changes have been made. It is then that merchants, property owners, and the city feel a need to protect the value added by those positive improvements and to reduce the likelihood of ill-planned ones.

Developing design guidelines is a political process; realization hinges on timing and public participation. The process of obtaining community input is the *single* most important factor in ensuring the success of the document. Guidelines are suggestive, not restrictive. They will only work with the consent and collaboration of the governed.

Guidelines need to be based on a consensus definition of what is special about a downtown; what qualities people would like to keep and so reinforce. Those most affected by guidelines, the property owners and tenants, must feel they have a voice in the process and can therefore control it. Otherwise, guidelines will be seen as being imposed from the outside and they will fail.

This process of community participation and consensus is not brief. Well-respected national consultants peg the process of developing guidelines at a minimum of six months, **with** their full-time involvement and an actively participating community. The temptation to shortcut the time involvement is great.

The most popular shortcut taken can be termed "Cut and Paste." Guidelines are collected from several communities, representing varying sizes, geographic locations, growth pressures, development patterns, history, and architectural character. Parts of these guidelines, or even a major portion of one document, are simply photocopied and reconstituted as guidelines for town "X." Without an analysis of the

unique and valued characteristics in town "X," subsequent improvement projects have no way of reinforcing those important qualities, and the goal— compatibility, or "neighborliness"— can never be accomplished.

Similar shortcuts are faced by consultants hired to develop design guidelines. Often the time-intensive and "expensive" site visits, building inventories, and public workshops are the first to be cut from the budget, leaving the consultant little alternative but to devise a generic set of criteria that do not address the particular and widely-held beliefs of the community. Consequently, the document may be seen as vague or unrelated to the town and becomes little used.

This handbook is an attempt to de-mystify the process of developing clear and workable design guidelines for new and existing buildings in commercial downtown areas. Each chapter is summarized by a series of steps needed before continuing to the next stage. Common design

Getting Started

Choosing an Approach

Guidelines run the spectrum from influencing design to regulating design, from voluntary to compulsory, suggestive to restrictive, "can do" to "can't do."

The evolution of design guidelines in a community parallels the revitalization effort. All design guidelines begin as voluntary guidelines. Mandatory compliance is a final evolutionary step near the end of a long-term revitalization effort, when the purpose is to protect the quality reinvestment in property that has occurred, rather than to induce improvement.

- ☐ If your downtown is in its first stages of a revitalization program, does not have a long history of design regulation, and is not currently under a functioning design review board, then a voluntary, suggestive type of guideline is needed.

- ☐ If your downtown is in an already designated project area, such as a Main Street program, and is sponsoring reinvestment incentives such as low interest loans or a rehabilitation grant program, then applying for these incentives should require review under the guidelines by a design committee before financing approval.

- ☐ If downtown projects are currently reviewed by a city-appointed design review board, guidelines must be developed to give objective criteria to base decisions of the board and to inform applicants of expectations and requirements. Here guidelines will have the power of enforcement. The board can delay the issuance of a building permit until the owner or developer meets the criteria for construction.

Organizing a Team

Establish a core group to initiate the development of the design guidelines. Select members for the group who have

diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise, and who have a special interest in the downtown and the future development of your community.

These include downtown property owners and merchants, members of the city council, city staff, (such as the city manager, planning or community development director), local design professionals (architects, landscape architects, urban planners), and attorneys - all have special expertise to contribute. Members of local historic or preservation groups, downtown real estate agents, and involved long-time citizens may have a valuable perspective. Limit the number in the core group to five or seven and use other people you've identified for their expertise at later stages or for specific tasks.

Once the core group has been formed, the city council should formally adopt the group as an advisory committee. A chairperson should then be elected. The chair's responsibility will include setting the times and locations of group and public meetings, serving as a contact person for outside consultants, acting as a liaison to city government and outside community groups, and keeping the project on track by serving as an information/communication focal point. A staff person to initiate and track the day-to-day progress of the guidelines should be appointed. This position requires either a half or full-time commitment. Sometimes a city employee already on payroll, the director of a non-profit board or historic society, or a student intern can devote half time to the project.

Next, the group needs to determine how decisions will be made, either by vote or consensus, and set meeting times. Then decide the goals and objectives of the guidelines, set a generous timeline for its completion, and determine what professional advice is needed.

Involving Consultants

At some point in the process of developing design guidelines, draw on the expertise of an outside consultant. Hire consultants to amplify and extend local expertise, not to substitute for it. A consultant can lead the walking tour,

help map the boundaries and develop criteria, and later review the guidelines. A design consultant is often invaluable in leading workshops. It is often easier for people to address problems and concerns they have about the downtown to someone from "outside." The consultant can keep the discussion on track and illustrate the ideas being presented.

The California Main Street Program has a downtown resource directory that lists consultants in the state with expertise in design, planning and preservation. To receive a copy, use the order form at the back of this book.

In Summary:

STEP 1: ***Choose Approach***

- Identify status of your town in revitalization effort.
- Identify how guidelines will be used in your community:
  - Voluntary.
  - Incentive Review.
  - Design Review Board.

STEP 2: ***Organize***

- Identify and select appropriate members for core group.
- Have city council adopt official advisory committee.
- Elect a chairperson.
- Identify and appoint a staff person
- Determine:
  - Goals and objectives of the guidelines.
  - How decisions will be made.
  - Meeting times.
  - Timeline for completion.
  - Use of professional consultants.
  - Project budget.

STEP 3: ***Involve Consultants***

- Identify and screen appropriate consultants.
- Interview selected consultants.
- Draw up agreement for services.

Inventory

The Process

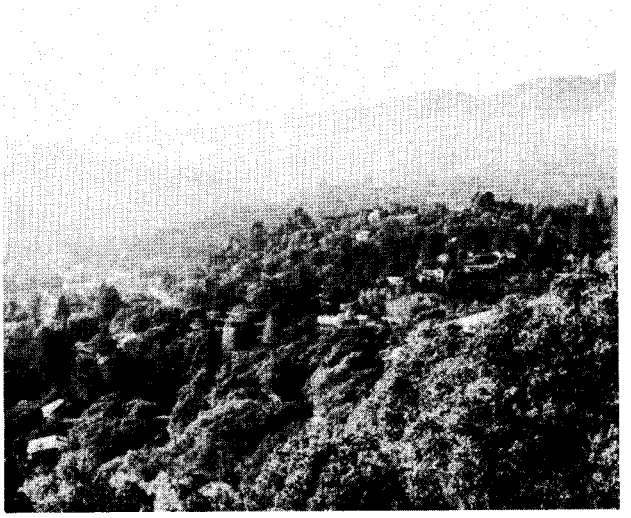
The first step in developing design guidelines is to survey or take stock. Assess what qualities are present in the downtown in order to determine what you want to encourage. This is done by means of a *windshield survey* and *sidewalk survey*.

A *windshield survey* is a driving tour of the project area to get a sense of the area's context and urban design elements. During the tour ask:

- Where are its entrances?
- Where are its edges?
- What makes this area unique from adjacent areas?
- What gives this area an unified image?

Second, note your downtown's setting. Natural landforms, vistas, water bodies, and your town's location on a plain, in a valley, or on a mountain, are all important considerations. The town's history, development, and current quality of life depend on it.

- From what areas can the downtown be viewed?
- Are views to and from the area restricted?
- Is there a vista to an important amenity, like a waterfront?
- What is its surrounding landscape?



Note your downtown's setting.

The third item to note is the pattern of development and circulation in the area. This is helpful in identifying sub-areas and constraints on future growth.

- Are the oldest buildings found in the center of town, with subsequent growth developing around it?
- Or are the earliest buildings now separated from the main section of downtown?
- What caused this change?

Regarding circulation:

- What is the dominant street pattern?
- Is there one "main" street or two?
- Or is there a small central grid of major streets?

- Are the major downtown streets curvilinear, hilly, flat, or straight?

By the time you have analyzed these questions, you will be able to identify the setting, boundaries, major characteristics, and patterns in your downtown that make it unique.

The *sidewalk survey* is a walking tour of the downtown to determine the area's building design elements. The survey should include all the members of the core group, plus an architect to help identify building elements, styles, and patterns. The survey should be held during a weekday to observe normal use. Walk the area defined by the boundaries you have formed from the windshield survey. Look at a group of buildings across the street:

- What makes this group of buildings a block?
- Are there strong horizontal elements, common to all or most of these buildings?
- Are buildings primarily one, two, or more stories?
- Is there a prevalent width to the facades (the face of the building)?
- Are rooflines primarily flat or pitched?
- Are there common ways of decorating the roofline, i.e. cornices or special forms?
- Is there a pattern to the size, shape, height or spacing of windows on the upper floors?
- Are there common building materials used?
- Are there special materials used for decoration? (Glass block, terra cotta or cast iron?)
- Is there a pattern of openings? Bay windows or arches?
- Are there many vacant lots between buildings?
- Is there a dominant architectural style, or a mixture? At what period were most buildings built?

Finally, look at the storefronts or lower portions of the buildings.

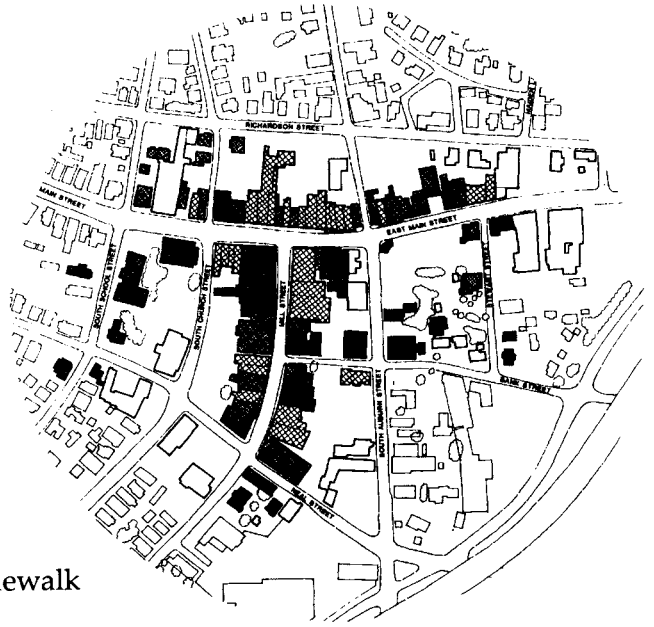
- Are entries generally recessed, or flush with the sidewalk?
- What happens above the display window?

- Is there a common height from the sill of the display window?
- Are awnings, canopies or porches common?
  Do they occur on both sides of the street?
  At a common height?
  On which blocks?

This process establishes a baseline determination of issues to be addressed in the design guidelines.

Analyze the Inventory

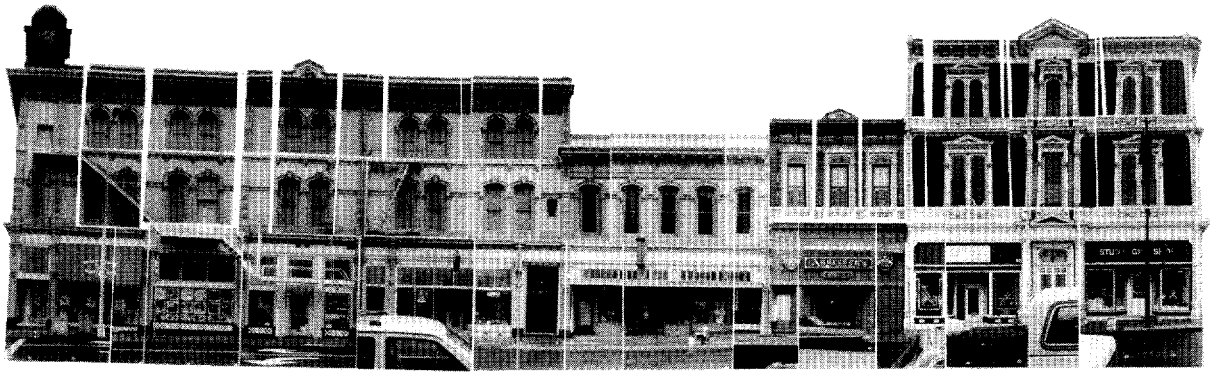
After the sidewalk survey, map the edges, entries, growth and circulation patterns, building ages, styles, heights and materials on a plan of the area showing existing buildings. Aerial photographic maps or other planning maps at a scale of one foot to one hundred feet are often available from local city planning departments. Old fire insurance maps (such as Sanborn Maps) can graphically illustrate the pattern of building and age of structures in the downtown.



Map the edges.

From this map, determine the boundaries of your project area. Consensus is important. Your only criteria should be the observations and patterns found during the driving and sidewalk tours, not on existing definitions of the central business district found on zoning maps or jogged to include an important person's building. Boundaries should be contiguous, concise, and clear. The base map, along with an historic inventory of all individual buildings in the area, can be used as the basis for a historic district nomination. Buildings listed on a historic inventory can also use the State Historic Building Code in place of more prescriptive local codes for construction.

Next, photograph every block of the project area. This can be done by photographing the individual buildings on a block at the same distance, say the edge of the sidewalk across the street, at the same camera height, using a 35mm camera with a 28 or 35mm lens. These photographs can be later spliced together and mounted on a board to create a



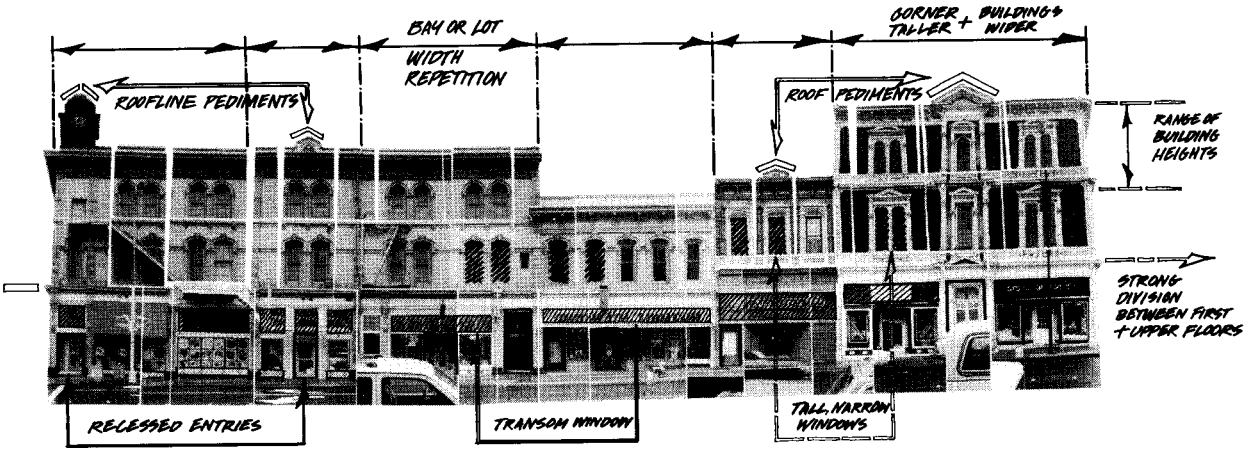
Jim Schultz

Create a photo montage.

montage, a composite picture with each block labeled by street and orientation (for example, south side of Main Street between Harrison and Front). Create a photocopy image of the montages. This can be used at a follow-up meeting of the core group to aid in analyzing their impressions. The montage will become useful later as a reference during public presentations and design review board meetings.

Historic photographs help determine the original architectural style and character of the area. Photos can be found through the public library, local newspapers, commemorative publications, longtime property owners, and local historic societies.

At a follow-up meeting, mount the boards on a wall and place the photocopy block images in the center of a large table that the core group can sit around. Lay a sheet of tracing or architect's sketch paper over the images and, with a felt-tip pen, outline those common elements noted on the walking tour. Outline the tops of the buildings on a block,



Outline common elements.

their windows, canopies, or widths. You will notice by the outline how dominant certain elements may be or notice others not clear during the tour.

These shared elements and qualities will become the basis for the design guideline criteria. Try to reach an informal consensus on the importance of a specific characteristic. Ask what would happen to the visual continuity of the block or area if this characteristic were absent. Is it found everywhere in the project area, or only on a specific block? Was this characteristic mentioned in written descriptions or histories of the town as well as verbally during the tour or group discussions? Again, you may want to have a professional consultant help in determining the relative strength or importance of certain elements.

At this point *hold a public information workshop,* inviting all property owners, tenants and other interested citizens to discuss the findings. Publicize the workshop through flyers, presentations to local service and business groups, and radio and newspaper media.

At the workshop, the facilitator should go through the list of important general characteristics, like natural setting and building patterns, and more specific characteristics you have discovered. Break up in groups of 6-10 around the marked up photocopy of a block in the project area. Have the groups develop a consensus list of characteristics they feel are important to the character of their block, then merge these into a master list that summarizes the most frequently mentioned characteristics.

This process is especially valuable if your community is unfamiliar or suspicious of the idea of design guidelines, or if it has been tried in the past and failed. The workshop is a great opportunity to build awareness and educate the area residents about the value of their district. Thank everyone for attending, and follow up with a mailing to each participant summarizing the decisions made, and give them the time, place and date of the next workshop to review the draft guidelines.

Guidelines for Community Participation

by Jeff Oberdorfer

1 The planning process must be facilitated in an atmosphere of trust and honesty.

2 Participatory planning requires a great deal of community organizing and preparation time prior to the actual workshops sessions.

3 The process must be facilitated by a person or team versed in group dynamics and be based upon local opinions and values.

4 The facilitator must have inter-disciplinary knowledge of planning issues (traffic, circulation, site planning, architecture, housing, open space design...).

5 There is a misconception that the facilitator is merely someone with a pleasant personality who can "deal with people." This myth is based upon the "show and tell" model of presentations. Participatory design/ planning is more complex.

6 The facilitator should be an advocate of the process/ participants. The participants are clients; no matter who is paying the consultants fees.

7 Graphics, maps, newsletters, flyers must be designed so that issues are presented in an articulate manner understandable by lay people.

8 Graphics for public meetings/workshops must be designed so that they are readable by a group of 50 - 100 persons.

9 Local officials and planners must respect the integrity of the participation process. If local officials wish to participate, they must do so as part of the small, consensus working groups.

10 Community participation, if properly facilitated and supported, can be an enjoyable, educational process – creatively fulfilling for all participants.

Let's review the steps involved in getting started:

STEP 4: *Take Stock*

- Complete a windshield survey
  - Note area's:
    - context,
    - setting,
    - pattern of development,
    - circulation,
- Conduct a sidewalk survey with an architect
  - Note common:
    - elements,
    - patterns,
    - materials,
    - period of construction,
    - architectural style,
    - storefront elements.

STEP 5: *Analyze Inventory*

- Record noted observations on a downtown map.
- Set boundaries of project area.
- Photograph individual buildings:
  - Assemble and mount by block,
  - Create a photocopy image,
- Locate historic photographs of downtown,
- Outline common elements noted in surveys,
- Determine important characteristics.

STEP 6: *Public Workshop*

- Determine date, place, and time of workshop.
- Send out notices to all area property owners and tenants.
- Make presentations to key downtown organizations and service groups.
- Write press release.
- Select workshop facilitator.
- At workshop:
  - List preliminary characteristics.
  - Divide into groups of 6-10.
  - List consensus group characteristics.
  - Thank participants.
- Determine date of second public workshop.
- Send follow-up mailing.

Writing the Guidelines

The introduction to any set of design guidelines should include a short history of the physical development of your commercial core: How and when it started, important developments, periods of expansion, natural and human calamities (such as fires and earthquakes) and their visible effect on downtown. Write about the physical setting of the town, its views and physical constraints, and its recent growth and changes.

Next, explain briefly why design guidelines were developed and what they intend to do. Explain how the guidelines should be applied to an individual project. Summarize how the guidelines will be used in your city; whether they are voluntary or required under certain conditions.

Criteria

Criteria, and recommendations dealing with the criteria, are the core of design guidelines. There are ten common criteria used in traditional commercial districts:

1. Height
2. Width
3. Setback
4. Proportion of Openings
5. Horizontal Rhythms
6. Roof Form
7. Materials
8. Color
9. Sidewalk Coverings
10. Signs

From your consensus list of shared elements present in your downtown, choose those criteria from the above list that most add to the character of your project area, those qualities that distinguishes your town from others.

Criteria are not formulas or specific solutions. They are flexible recommendations designated to develop compatibility within the building, its neighbors, and the area. Criteria are flexible to avoid the danger of sameness. They encourage rather than insist, and discourage rather than prohibit. They guide, but they can't design.

Explain the reasons behind your criteria. People are more likely to support them if they understand how they came about.

Now let's go through the list of criteria in detail:

Height

You may have found a strong similarity in the height of buildings in your area. Renovation or new construction should respect this resemblance, it is often a strong determinant of the downtown's character as opposed to neighboring areas.

Decide how strong the similarity of height is downtown. If the buildings are essentially the same height, word the criteria to *maintain the alignment of building cornices or rooflines*. If there are small variations in height, the guideline could read *additions or new construction should fall within a range of 10 percent of the mean building height found in the block*. In a transitional area, where there may be more of a variation in building height, the guideline may note, *the height of the building should be within the range of heights found on the immediate block.*

What is the primary lot width?

Corner sites pose a special opportunity; you may find in your photo montage that corner buildings are often larger and more elaborate than midblock structures. In this situation, you may want to have *buildings on the ends of blocks be similar in height to buildings on adjoining corners.*

Width

Along with height, building or lot width is usually the most predominant visual quality of downtowns. Downtowns were often subdivided into relatively narrow and deep lots, and the march of common-sized buildings down a street defines a characteristic rhythm.

What is the primary lot width in your downtown? Encourage new construction taking two or more lots to *respect the primacy of this width by designing a rhythmic division of the facade to maintain this progression.* If the streets are defined by a wall of buildings, encourage infill construction to *maintain the existing building wall by building from side lot line to side lot line.*

Setback

The third primary characteristic of your project area is setback. Setback also distinguishes downtown from neighboring residential areas. Commercial buildings are typically set directly on the front lot line, creating the wall of buildings effect associated with urban areas.

Non-aligned facade

If this is the dominant pattern in your project area, include a guideline to *maintain the alignment of facades along the sidewalk edge.* This guideline should also pertain to parking lots in the area. The sidewalk edge should be delineated (emphasized) with columns, plantings, low walls or other vertical projections along the sidewalk. If there is no alignment at the front lot line, but a strong uniform setback is found, the guideline can read, *maintain the uniform setback of buildings and align the facades.*

Proportion of Openings

A common element you may have found from the tracing of your city's blocks is a similar size, spacing, or shape of window openings among neighboring buildings. For example, if buildings are primarily two or three stories, windows may be predominantly narrow with vertical orientation, stacked above each other, with a spacing of three or more window widths between openings. Or,

buildings may be primarily one story with wide, horizontal windows and little or no spacing between openings.

Note the differences between upper story openings and storefront, or street level openings. Usually there is a much greater transparent or glazed open area at storefront level for pedestrians to have a better view of the merchandise displayed behind.

If you have identified a prevalent pattern to the openings on your downtown blocks, write a guideline to have new construction and remodeling of existing buildings *maintain this proportion and spacing of openings.*

Identify common horizontal elements found among groups of buildings.

Horizontal Rhythms

Closely related to the pattern of openings on a building facade is a rhythm of elements. Moving past repeated similar elements on neighboring buildings creates a continuous band, a shared element of its own. Examples include a band or division between the storefront and upper facades of buildings at similar heights, or a predominance of canopies or awnings extending along several facades, or the alignment of windows and window sills.

Identify common horizontal elements found among groups of buildings. Create a guideline to encourage the continuance of this rhythm. For example, if there is a strong horizontal banding between floors, *maintain a clear visual division between street level and upper floors.* Sometimes the division between floors may be a change of building material, say a wood storefront with a brick or masonry upper facade. Be sure to address the range of acceptable methods that have been used in the downtown area to create this visual distinction. *Encourage the use of canopies or awnings to maintain or extend a strong shared streetscape element* if it exists.

Materials

Downtown buildings share a history of local building materials. In California this includes wood construction in the north coast, local stone in the Sierra foothills, brick in the central portion of the state, and plaster (commonly known as stucco) in the south. These common materials help link your town to its geographical setting.

The structural construction material may be varied, but common facing, or finish materials have developed over the course of time – the ironfront buildings of Petaluma, for example, or the existence of glazed terra cotta or tan brick as a finish material. Common trims including wood, terra cotta, ceramic tile, or rounded plaster corners may finish openings.

Determine what original building or finish materials are used most often on downtown buildings. How influential is this material? If very dominant, you may want to strongly *encourage the use of this material in new construction.* You may also want to suggest the manner that the material is placed on the building; for example, horizontal wood siding rather than diagonal; finished, painted wood rather than rough or untreated and clear glass rather than mirror.

If there are a variety of building materials found on downtown blocks, *list what materials are commonly found and how they are distributed within the project boundaries* (if your town shows a change in materials from older sections to newer).

The quality of building materials varies widely, and it is the quality of the finish material and its application that determines compatibility. A guideline may read, *use the highest quality facing materials you can afford.* Or, *materials that are compatible in quality, color, texture, finish, and dimension to those listed as being common in the project area, are strongly encouraged.*

A major difference between residential and commercial buildings is their roof pitch or rooflines.

Roof Forms

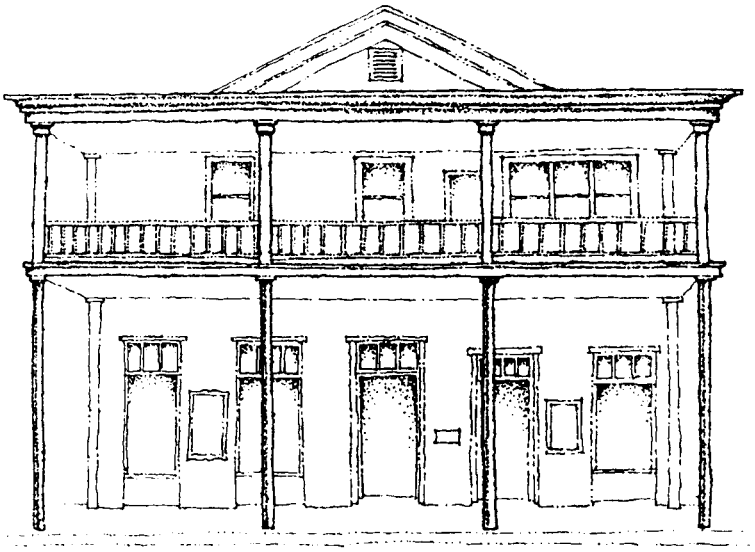
A major difference between residential and commercial buildings is their roof pitch or rooflines. Whereas residential structures usually have some form of sloping or pitched roof, commercial structures are known for their relatively flat roofs, hidden by the extension of the front wall plane. If this vertical extension is low, it is known as a *parapet*. If the extension beyond the roof plane is great, sometimes doubling the height of the building, it is known as a *false front*. The tops of these walls, or the roofline, are often embellished with special architecture elements such as cornices, special facing materials or decorative details. Often the form of the roofline is punctuated with arches or stepped sections.

If consistent rooflines are found in your community, consider wording your guideline to *avoid sloped or residential-type roofs*, suggest that *the roof plane be hidden from view on the front facade*, and encourage the decoration of the roofline by use of special materials, forms, or decorative details, using examples from surrounding buildings as a guide.

Color

Color is a sensitive subject in design guidelines. Often innocuous phrases such as *colors should coordinate with neighboring buildings*, have been interpreted by design review committees to mean *match*, leading eventually to blocks or entire towns in a variation of yellow. Some cities have developed a palette of approved colors, often chosen as the colors least likely to offend, leading to a dull streetscape lacking punch and distinction. The use of only pre-approved colors may be unlawful, as a recent California Superior Court ruling has found.

There exists literally an unlimited number of colors, let alone color combinations. Color selection considerations include: *be a good neighbor,* coordinate with other colors on your block. The orientation of your building (north, east, south, west) affects the appearance of colors. *Colors on south and west facades appear warmer than if placed on north or east sides.*



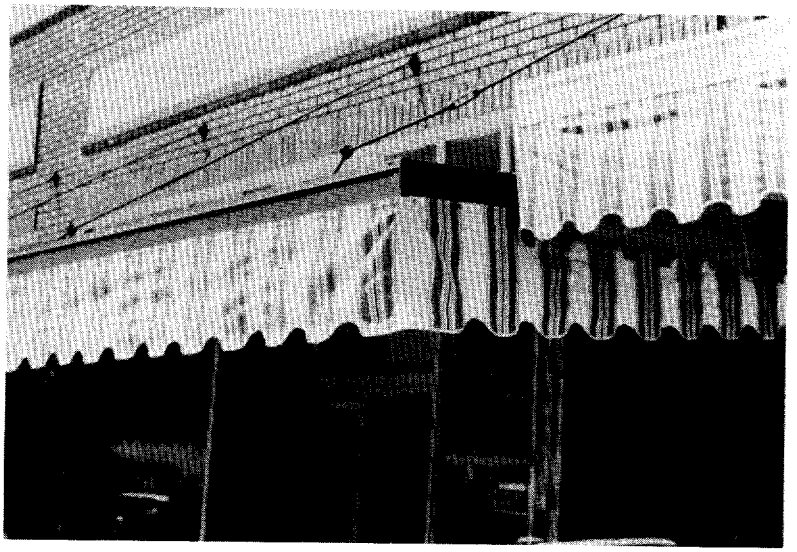
In some early California towns, porches are the dominant shading device along commercial streets.

Historically, certain color types were associated with architectural styles. Late nineteenth century Victorian buildings used dark, rich colors. Turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts Classical style buildings used off-whites. Spanish or Mission Revival buildings of the early century favored pale yellows and peaches, while 1930's Art Deco structures often used shades of black, white, and grey.

Guidelines dealing with color are best when they address general concerns, such as *the larger and plainer the building, the more subtle the color.* Small buildings or those with elaborate detailing can often use more colors and more intense colors. Tell people what to avoid, as, *avoid the more intense hues of a color, avoid using more than one vivid color per building,* or, *avoid using colors that are disharmonious with other colors used on the building or found on adjacent buildings.* When you do encourage, avoid specific statements. Use, *relate paint colors to natural material colors found on your building,* such as brick, terra cotta, stone, or ceramic tile, *and existing elements* such as signs or awnings. *Contrasting colors which accent architectural details and entrances are encouraged.*

Sidewalk Coverings

Awnings are a popular item in the remodeling of storefronts. Because they have a major visual effect not only on the building, but the streetscape, as well as encroach upon public space, you may want to address sidewalk overhangs



National Main Street Center

Traditionally, awnings were mounted between the transom and display windows.

in your guidelines. Overhangs shelter pedestrians from rain, protect display window merchandise from damage, regulate the amount of heat and direct sunlight entering a store, and serve as a sign or identity for the business.

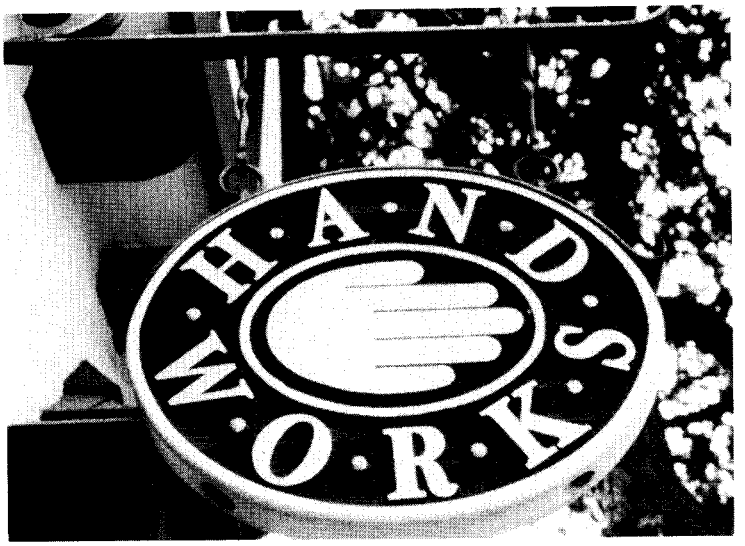
Traditionally, awnings were made of cloth and were mounted either above transom windows below the signband or between transom and display windows. Early twentieth century Beaux Arts Classical style buildings sported permanent suspended horizontal canopies. In some early California towns, porches are the dominant shading device along commercial street.

Determine which overhang device is most commonly found in your downtown; (awnings, canopies, or porches) and how pervasive this form is along your major streets. This will allow you to decide how strongly you want to encourage the continuity of this for.

Secondly, summarize any awning or encroachment ordinances your city may have regarding overhangs for property owners. Include some general guidelines supporting or elaborating their use such as *original awnings or canopies found on buildings should be maintained, be structurally sound, and should not be removed from the building.* Addressing temporary shading devices such as awnings, guidelines may include, *cloth awnings are encouraged on south facing storefronts.* Important general recommendations include: *placement of awnings should occur at the top of openings. Awning shapes should relate to the shape of the top of the opening,* to discourage the use of arch awnings on straight windows. *Consider the cumulative effect of all awnings existing along the street or multiple awnings on neighboring buildings when designing your awnings.*

Signs

Signs can go a long way toward enhancing or detracting from the attractiveness of your downtown shopping area. Consider the positive pedestrian shopping experience found in Pasadena, Ojai, or Carmel, California; cities that have some of the most extensive controls on signage. Most cities have sign ordinances that specify the size and type of signs allowed. Be sure to reference these rules or reproduce the full text of the ordinance as an appendage to your guidelines. Sign guidelines should address visual concerns not found in your ordinance and encourage the use of pedestrian-oriented signs.



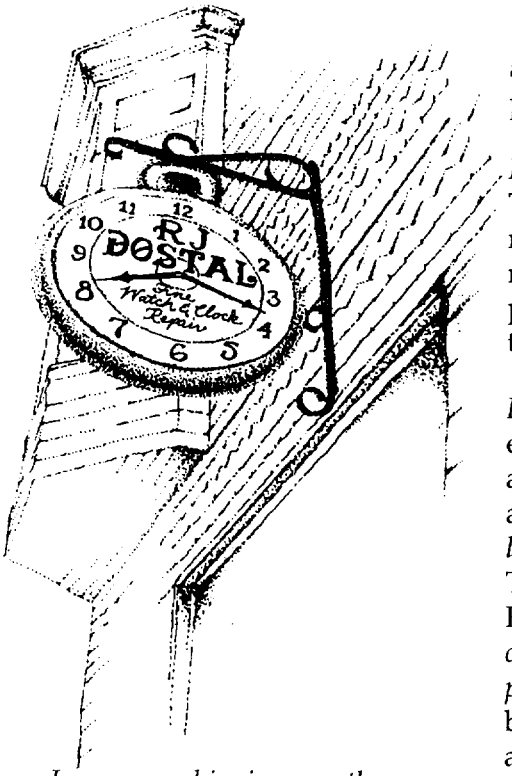
Hanging signs

The most common types of signs found on downtown establishments are *flush mounted, hanging,* and *window signs.*

Flush mounted signs are signboards or individual die-cut letters placed on the face of the building. Usually there is a recess or horizontal molded band on buildings that was designed to accommodate the sign.

Hanging signs are hung from sidewalk coverings or mounted perpendicular to the sidewalk. Since they are also placed at eye level, they are very effective for pedestrians. Show examples of hanging signs from your town and encourage the use of these signs on retail businesses.

Window signs are also pedestrian oriented. They



Icon or graphic signs are the oldest type of commercial sign.

are common, so that the majority of display area is open for pedestrian window shopping.

Icon or *graphic signs* are the oldest type of commercial sign. They are a type of sign that illustrate by their shape the nature of the business within. They are the easiest signs to read and are therefore well-suited to vehicular as well as pedestrian traffic. If these signs exist in your community, they should be encouraged.

Lighted signs include neon and signs that are lit internally or externally by bulbs or lamps. If internally lit signs are allowed in your central business district, consider including a guideline suggesting *black or dark color backgrounds with light lettering,* or *individually illuminated letters are encouraged.* They are more legible from a distance and project less glare. For externally illuminated signs, encourage *light to be contained within the sign frame and not spill over to other portions of the building.* As neon and bare bulb signs are becoming quite rare, their continued use and maintenance are to be encouraged.

In general, *signs should relate in placement and size to other building elements. Do not obscure other building elements such as windows, cornices or decorative details,* and *sign material, style and color should complement the building facade.* Often there are a number of larger buildings downtown that contain several individual businesses. *Individual shop signs in a single storefront should relate to each other in design, size, color, placement on the building, and lettering style.* Franchises and chain stores will adapt their graphics to meet local guidelines and ordinances.

Do not obscure other building elements such as windows, cornices or decorative details.

Alterations

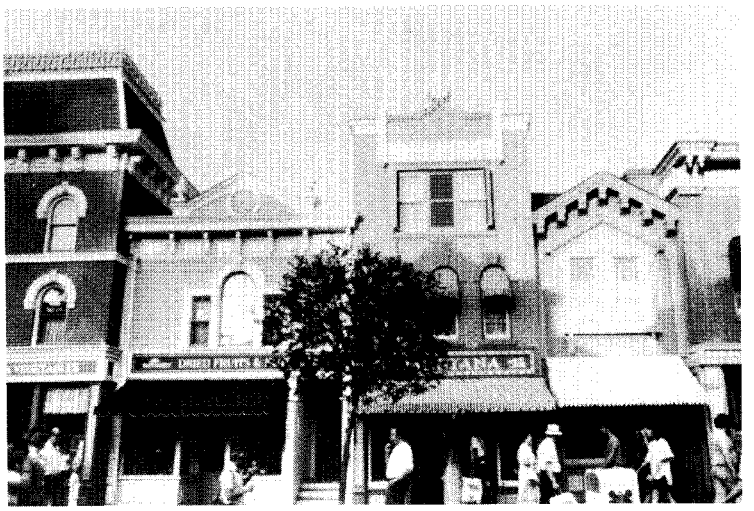
Physical change is part of the continuing evolution of downtown. Downtowns developed over decades illustrate the variety of architectural styles represented in downtown buildings. They are unified by shared elements, like materials, height, and scale, not just style.

As a general approach, *respect the original period and style of the building,* do not make a building look "historical," or older than it really is. This cheapens what is truly historic and original in your town. If the restoration of the original facade rather than a contemporary design is desired, *base the restoration on solid historical documentation* such as photos or original drawings, not on one's "best guess."

New Additions

A modern addition to an older building is the most sensitive and difficult design issue to manage.

The National Park Service in "Preservation Brief 14" focuses on this sensitive issue and gives three criteria to consider when planning a new addition:



Avoid a phony historical look.

- *Preserve significant historic materials and features.* Avoid constructing the addition on the primary or other character-defining facade, (like a cross-street side). Secondly, minimize loss of historic material on exterior walls. Building finishes used for the addition should be similar in material, quality, color, and dimension to those used on the existing structure.

- *Preserve the character of the building.* The scale (size and proportion) of the addition should be compatible with the original building. An additional story on an existing building with a characteristic roofline can be set well back from the roof edge to ensure that the building's profile is not radically changed.

- *Make a visual distinction between old and new.* Avoid a phony historical look. Additions should be sympathetic to the base building, yet be a product of its own time. Have shared elements create a sense of visual relatedness. If the building is an important one in the community, consider a visual separation between the addition and the original building, as this would preserve the identity of the historic building.

Storefronts, bearing the pressure to create a new image as businesses move in and out, have commonly experienced several changes in their life.

Storefronts

The storefront is the changeable area of the commercial building facade, a transparent area enframed by the the building wall above and its side extensions to the street. Storefronts should be designed to *fit inside the original opening* and not extend beyond it.

Storefronts, bearing the pressure to modernize or create a new image as businesses move in and out, have commonly experienced several changes in their life. These changes happen slowly, but often have an unsightly cumulative effect, little related to the storefront's original form.

The owner should *determine if the existing storefront is the original or a later alteration.* This can often be accomplished by standing across the street and looking at the upper and storefront levels of the building. Is there a shared appearance or integration between the upper facade and the storefront? If so, value this integrity. *Preserve original materials or details and the shape of original openings,* otherwise the proportions of the facade will be lost. *Replace missing original elements* such as transom windows.

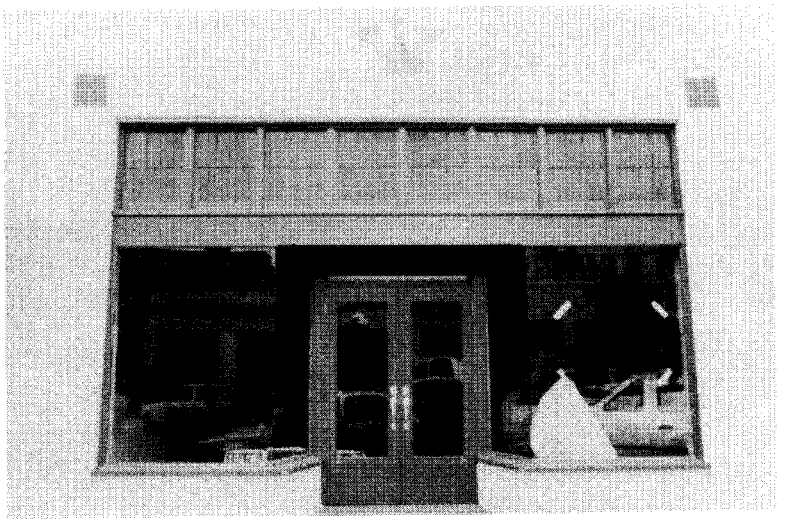
If there is little relation between upper and lower facade, a complimentary modern design or a restoration of the original storefront is in order. Occasionally, a remodeled storefront is of equal value architecturally as the original.

Also, it is wise to *retain alterations if they are well-designed and constructed,* even if they are of a style different from the building.

Storefronts have their own common elements. Entry, kickplate, display windows, transom windows, and a horizontal area for a canopy or sign, all were massed within the picture of the building frame to give an open, visually interesting appearance at eye level.

Entries

Commercial storefront entries were typically recessed. This provided more area for display space, a sheltered transition area to the interior of the store, and emphasized the entrance. *Recessed entries should be retained and encouraged in new storefront construction.* Commercial entry doors use large, glass panels with vertical proportions to aid a sense of invitation and openness to the business. *Solid or residential-type doors with small areas of glass should be avoided. Openings containing double entry doors should be retained.*



Storefronts have their own common elements.

Display Windows

The display window is the link between the pedestrian environment outside and the business inside. *The original size, division and shape of display windows within the overall storefront frame should be preserved.* Glass should be transparent to be open for pedestrian viewing. If there are bars or offices in storefronts downtown, *blinds or cafe curtains can be used for privacy.*

Kickplates

The kickplate, or bulkhead, functions to protect the display window by raising the glass area to a safer and more easily viewed height. Historically, materials have included wood panels, marble and ceramic tile. The *original kickplate mate-*

rial should always be retained, maintained, or uncovered when possible. Newer storefronts can have simplified kickplates in similar or smooth materials, or have an all-glass storefront that retains a kickplate line and proportion by use of a framing bar or painted line.

Transom Windows

Transom windows were smaller windows above the display windows that functioned as early energy savers. They allowed daylight to enter deep into the interior space

The Secretary of the Interior's

1 Every reasonable effort shall be made to provide a compatible use for a property which requires minimal alteration of the building, structure, or site and its environment, or to use a property for its originally intended purpose.

2 The distinguishing original qualities or character of a building, structure, or site and its environment shall not be destroyed. The removal or alteration of any historic material or distinctive architectural features should be avoided when possible.

3 All buildings, structures, and sites shall be recognized as products of their own time. Alterations that have no historical basis and which seek to create an earlier appearance shall be discouraged.

4 Changes which may have taken place in the course of time are evidence of the history and development of a building, structure, or site and its environment. These changes may have acquired significance in their own right, and this significance shall be recognized and respected.

5 Distinctive stylistic features or examples of skilled craftsmanship which characterize a building, structure, or site shall be treated with sensitivity.

and heat to escape. Transoms also continued the transparentness of the storefront up to the top "frame" of the upper facade, and are therefore an important element in the proportion of the building front. Often transom windows can still be found in downtown buildings underneath dropped ceilings and exterior coverups. If the ceiling inside the store has been lowered, the ceiling could slope up 2 - 3 feet back to meet the transom or dark painted panels can be placed behind transom windows to simulate transparency and depth.

Standards for Rehabilitation

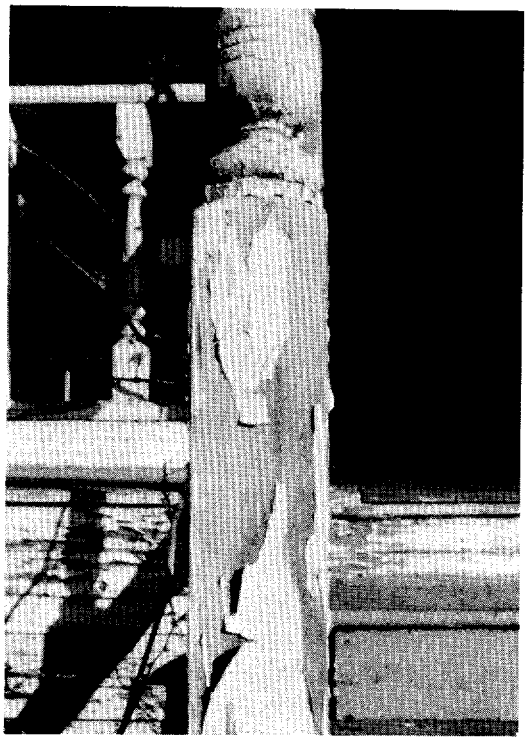
6 Deteriorated architectural features shall be repaired rather than replaced, wherever possible. In the event replacement is necessary, the new material should match the material being replaced in composition, design, color, texture, and other visual qualities. Repair or replacement of missing architectural features should be based on accurate duplications of features, substantiated by historic, physical, or pictorial evidence rather than on conjectural designs or the availability of different architectural elements from other buildings or structures.

7 The surface cleaning of structures shall be undertaken with the gentlest means possible. Sandblasting and other cleaning methods that will damage the historic building materials shall not be undertaken.

8 Every reasonable effort shall be made to protect and preserve archaeological resources affected by, or adjacent to any project.

9 Contemporary design for alterations and additions to existing properties shall not be discouraged when such alterations and additions do not destroy significant historical, architectural or cultural material, and character of the property, neighborhood or environment.

10 Wherever possible, new additions or alterations to structures shall be done in such a manner that if such additions or alterations were to be removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the structure would be unimpaired.



Cleaning and paint removal from facade materials should use the gentlest means possible.

Maintenance

Maintenance is the first approach to take in changes to existing buildings. It is often deferred maintenance that contributes to the shabby appearance of central business districts. Simple cleaning and repair can transform a building or a block overnight, allowing it to be rediscovered.

If you are at the beginning of a revitalization effort, lack of maintenance and repair may be the major visual problem in your downtown. A section of the guidelines dealing with common maintenance problems and their proper correction would be a valuable public education tool.

Let's review the steps in writing the guidelines:

STEP 7: ***Introduction***

- Write a short history of physical development.
- Describe physical setting of town.
- Explain why guidelines developed.

STEP 8: ***Criteria***

- Select strongest characteristics from list.
- Determine:
  - Similarity of height.
  - Primary lot width.
  - Setback pattern.
  - Shape and spacing of openings.
  - Common horizontal elements.
  - Building materials used.
  - Consistency of roofline shape.
  - Common overhang device.
  - Number of buildings with multiple shopfronts.
- Summarize Ordinances:
  - Encroachment.
  - Sign.
- Develop specific recommendations.
- Explain reasons behind criteria.

STEP 9: ***Alterations***

- Select information needed regarding:
  - New Additions
  - Storefronts
    - entries
    - display windows
    - transom windows
  - Maintenance
    - gather technical information

Illustrating Guidelines

Illustrations make ideas, relationships, and architectural terms many times clearer to the reader than reams of text.

All illustrations, line drawings and photographs should come from examples within the project area. Not only does this add to the specialized criteria developed for your town, but they provide real life examples that the reader can visit and gain additional insights from.

Go through your guideline draft and highlight all criteria, terms, and explanations that would be more easily understood by a picture. From this list, identify examples in the project area.

All criteria and recommendations should be illustrated for clarity and understanding. Criteria of height, width and horizontal elements are best shown by photographs of several buildings along a street or block in your project area. Simple line drawings traced over a photographic enlargement can illustrate and emphasize more detailed criteria such as signage or awnings by excluding or minimizing other aspects of the facade.

They need not be formal. Simple freehand sketches with dense line weight and clear black and white photos are sufficient. A graphic artist or student intern may be willing to take on the task of illustration and its coordination with the text.

Implementing the Guidelines

Now that a draft guideline is written, a second public workshop is needed to present the document to area property owners, merchants, professionals, and potential developers, contractors, and architects involved in downtown projects. A copy of the draft with a press release can advertise the workshop and initiate the public debate.

At the workshop, review the criteria and how they apply to buildings in town. Questions and concerns can be aired and addressed, minor modifications, alterations of language, or expansion of topics can be made. All suggestions and changes brought up in the general session are then discussed in small groups of 6-10 people. Each group reaches and develops a consensus list of changes which are summarized and passed on to the core committee for review and refinement. The final document is completed and approved by city council. The main street board or area revitalization group now takes responsibility for printing, distribution, and encouraging use of the guidelines.

Publishing

It's best to have guidelines receive as broad an audience as possible, so reproduction costs need to be low. Reproduction by photocopy and simple expandable binding methods makes the most sense. This allows easy updates and expansion at a later date. Often the city, a downtown association, or historic society may contribute to the cost of publication. Downtown printers may also subsidize or contribute to the cost of printing.

Distribution

It's important that guidelines get to potential developers, contractors, architects and owners before design decisions are made and drawings completed, before a substantial investment of time and money has been made.

Draw up a distribution list, consisting of area architects, designers, city building and planning staff, and city council, developers, contractors, bankers, real estate agents, the

Chamber of Commerce, and the local library. All property owners and tenants in the project area, and workshop participants should also receive a copy. The city, local service groups or utilities may sponsor or subsidize the cost of distribution.

Evaluation

As with any new activity, a process should be established after publication to monitor the results of the guidelines and make appropriate changes. If an evaluation process is followed, it will ensure that your design guidelines remain a living, flexible document able to address future needs and developments.

The original core members should agree to meet every nine to twelve months to evaluate the success of the guidelines. Gather reactions from area property owners and developers regarding the guidelines. The core group should question:

- Are the spirit of the guidelines being reinforced by city policy? (or, if applicable, design review board decisions?).
- Do recent physical changes attain the level of visual quality aimed for? Is new construction in keeping with the guidelines' goals?
- Are portions of the guidelines unclear to users?
- Has reaction to the guidelines been positive, indifferent, ignored or hostile? By which groups? This could point to a failure in marketing, distribution, or in the understanding of requirements.
- Is there a need and general desire for stronger wording, additional criteria, or greater compliance?
- Is enforcement of guideline criteria desired?

The answers to these questions will provide a list of changes needed in the document, or revisions in town policy.

Evolution

Design Guidelines evolve as does a revitalization program.

- As a downtown revitalization program begins, public education and awareness of design issues increase. This is the primary function of design guidelines.

- As the program progresses, incentives may be developed to encourage building rehabilitation, and use of these incentives may require project compliance with design guidelines. This is the second function of design guidelines.

- After a period of building rehabilitation and reinvestment, protection of this investment is sought by property owners and others. It is at this point that a city review committee, or local district committee is established to review all projects in the district. The committee uses the design guideline document as the basis for their decisions of approval or rejection. This is the third function of design guidelines.

- After a period of review, criteria regarding changes to area buildings become common knowledge. The public education cycle is now complete, and guidelines are no longer needed. This is the ultimate goal of design guidelines.

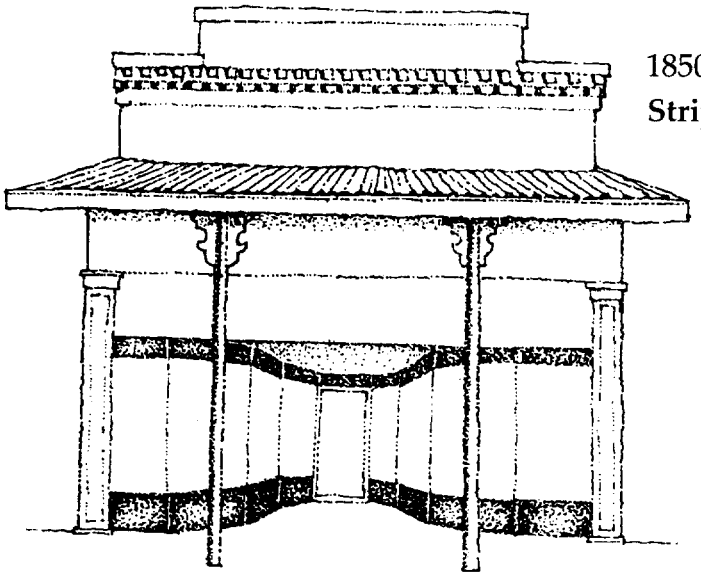
California Commercial Architectural Styles

1840-1860

Greek Revival (Monterey Style)

Characteristics:

- gabled, low pitched, shingled roof
- symmetrical placement of windows and doors
- entrances with side and transom lites
- narrow wood porches and second floor balconies

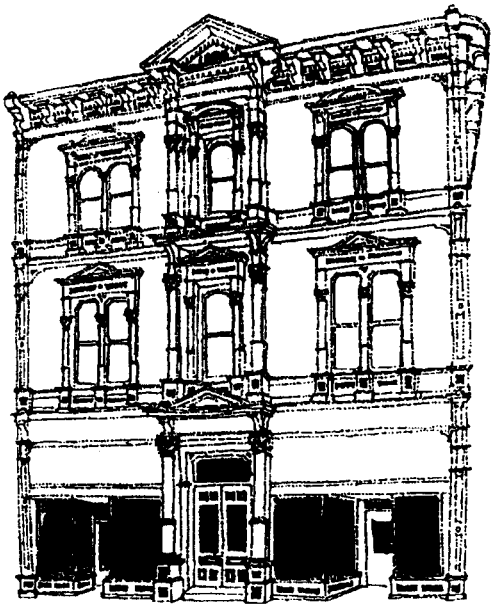


1850-1870

Stripped Classical (Gold Rush Style)

Characteristics:

- simple masonry rectangular facade
- roofline frieze
- tall, narrow windows with iron shutters
- overhead wood canopy



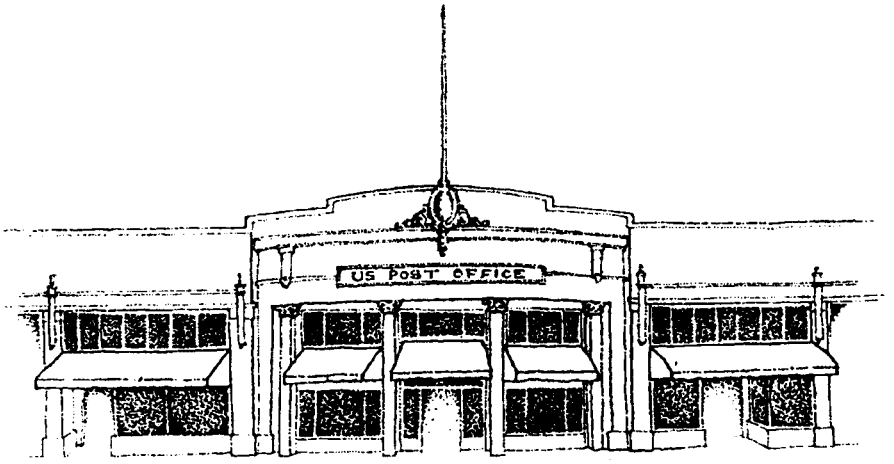
1870-1890
Victorian

Characteristics:
Italianate
- vertical composition
- upper story bays common
- tall arched or round top windows
- bracketed cornice
- recessed entry
- ornate detailing

Queen Anne
- asymmetrical facade
- varied textured surfaces
- corner towers

1900-1910
Beaux Arts Classical

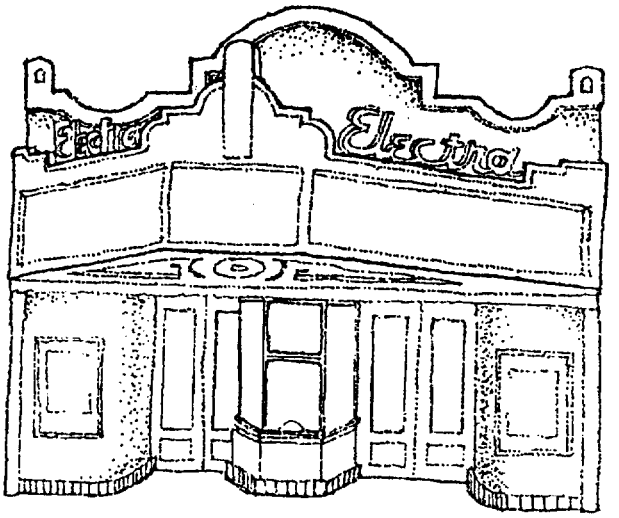
Characteristics:
- symmetrical, formal facade
- monumental centered entrances
- odd number division of facade
- smooth surfaces
- classical, restrained details: dentils, columns, pediments

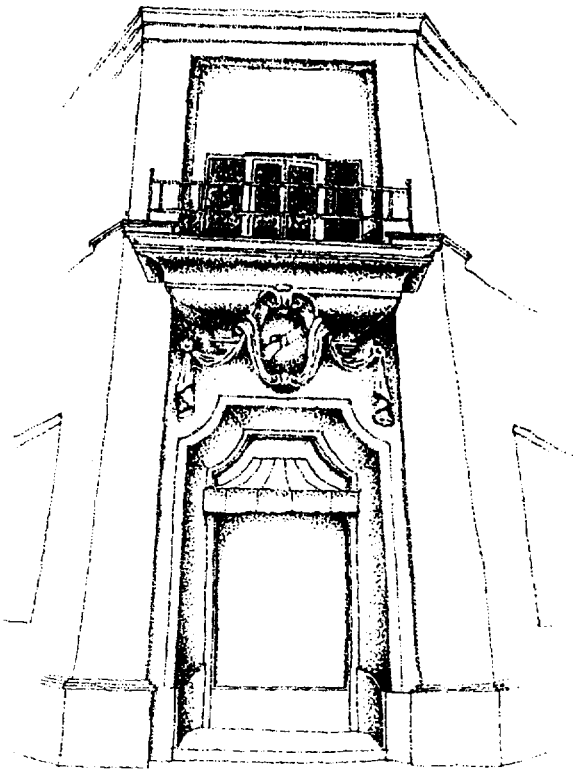


1905-1915
Mission Revival

Characteristics:

- plain stucco walls
- arched openings
- brackets
- scalloped, parapeted gable ends

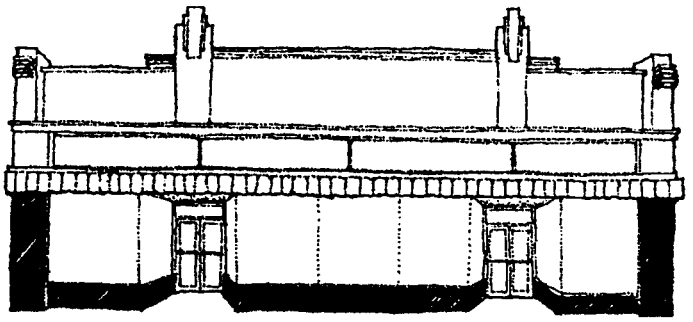




1915-1930+
Spanish Colonial Revival

Characteristics:

- flat stucco walls
- few, small openings
- decorative ironwork
- deep-set windows in vertical bands
- cast concrete or terra cotta ornament
- glazed and unglazed tile
- tile roof



1920-1930
Art Deco

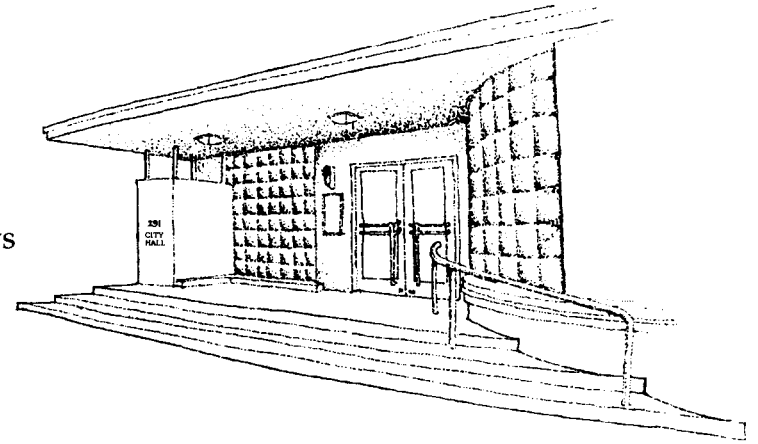
Characteristics:

- angular, vertical zig-zag forms
- low-relief, highly stylized ornamental motifs
- smooth surface volumes
- flat roof vertical, metal sash window strips
- frameless display windows

1930-1945
Streamline Moderne

Characteristics:

- soft or rounded corners
- smooth, unadorned wall surface
- horizontal bands of windows
- circular motifs
- no projections
- mirrored pigmented glass and glass block

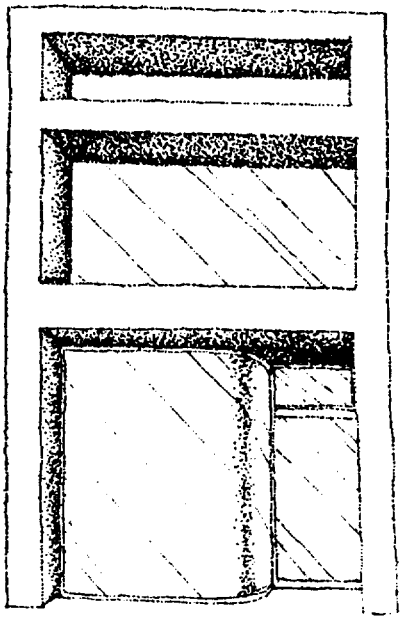


1945-1965

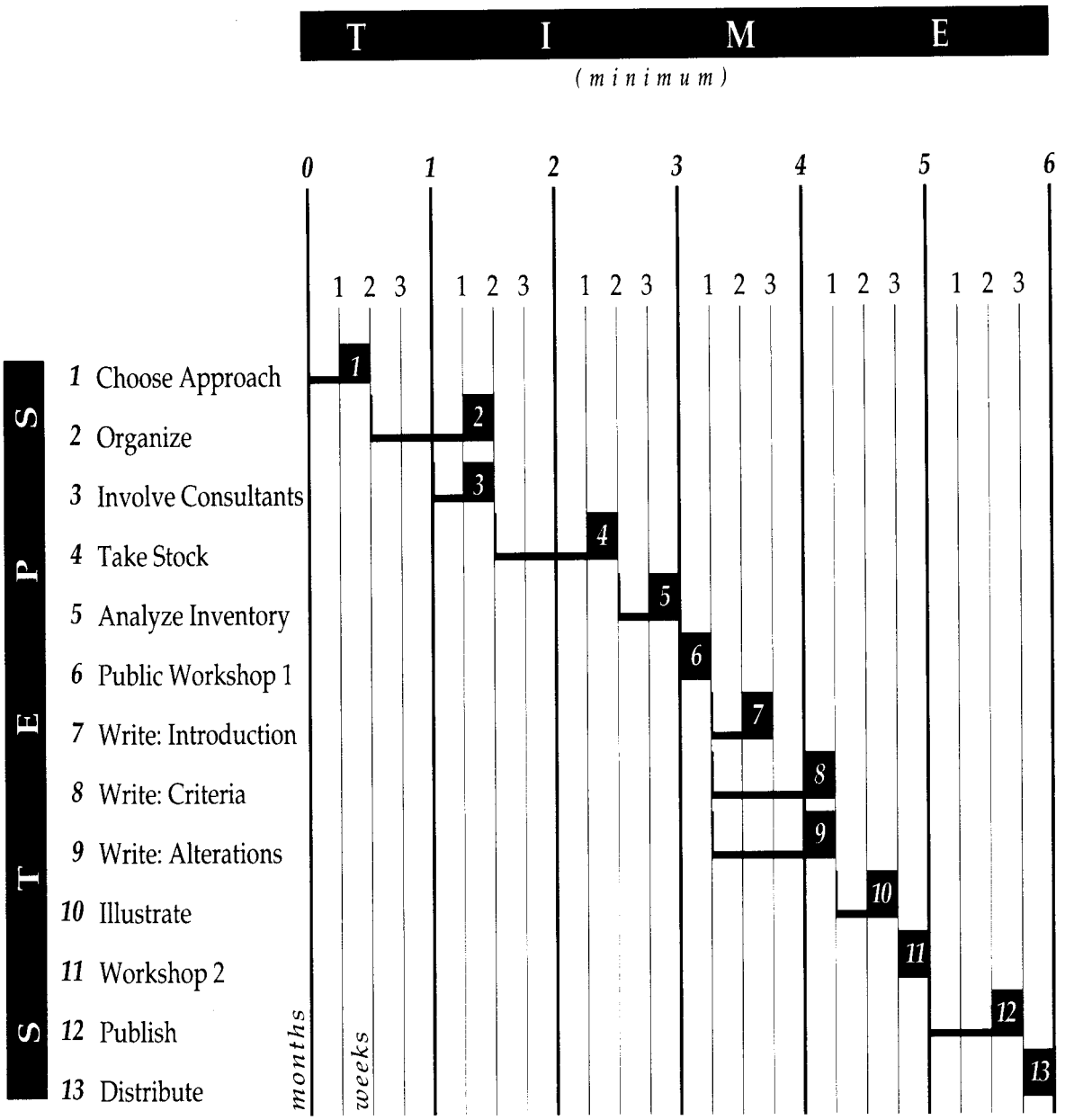
International Style

Characteristics:

- low, usually one or one and a half stories
- box shape
- flat, unadorned surfaces
- aluminum doors and windows
- deep recessed centered entrance emphasizing showcase display windows (large scale buildings)
- angled, asymmetrical entry (small scale)



Project Timeline



Height

Building Height is one the most important elements in the compatibility of new structures or additions to existing buildings. A building that is significantly taller or shorter than adjacent structures can disrupt the visual continuity of a street.

On Main Street, decorative roofline shapes add interest, yet the relative similarity of heights creates a strong repetition, a common edge to the sky.

Recommendation:

Additions or new construction should fall within a range of 10 percent of the mean building height found on the block.

SAMPLE

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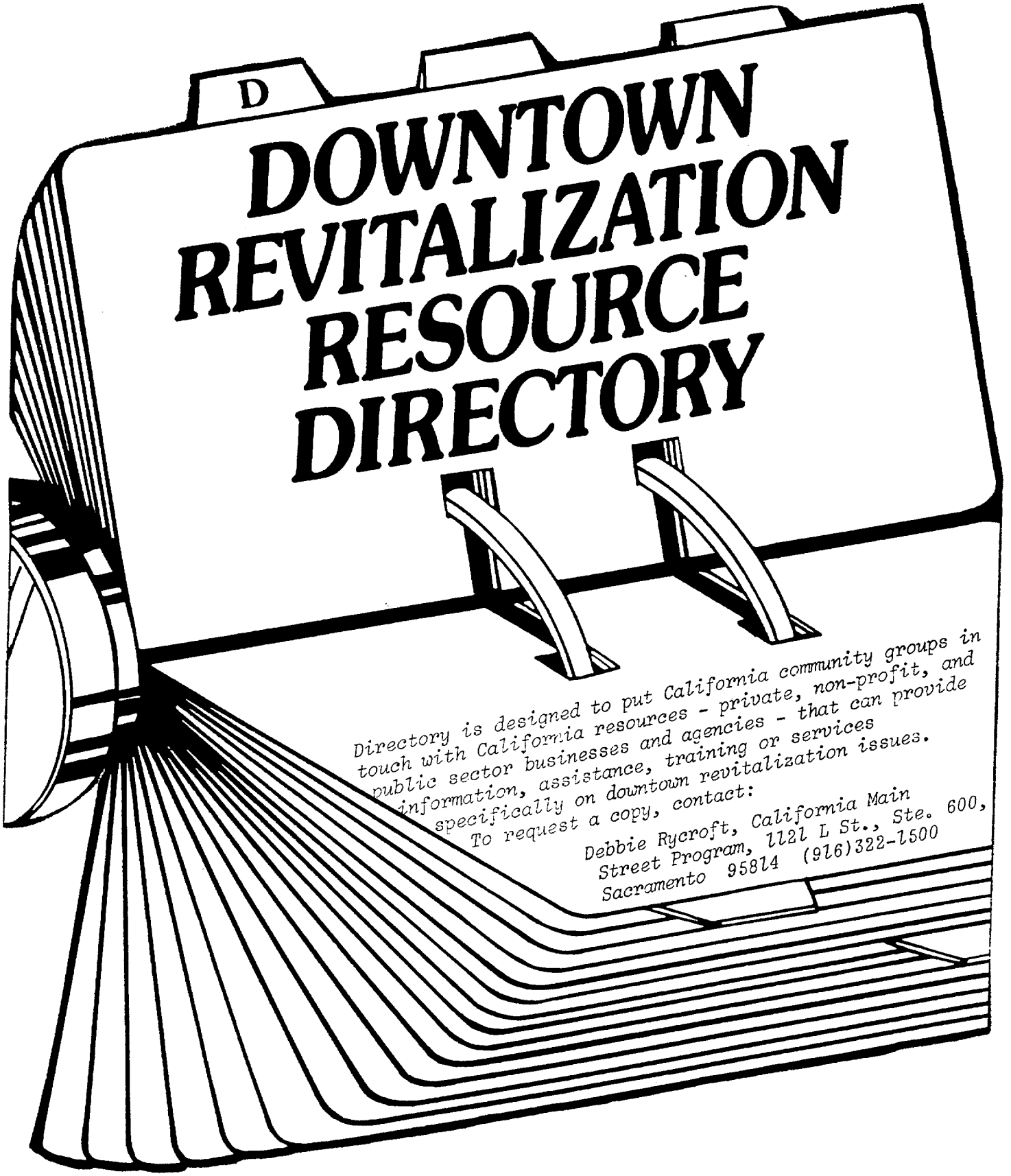

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State Office of Historic Preservation
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