

GOOD DESIGN IS GOOD BUSINESS.



# DOWNTOWN DESIGN GUIDE



## 1 Introduction



### A. The Role of Design

The Main Street Four-Point Approach® to downtown revitalization is a highly successful, comprehensive strategy that empowers communities to revitalize downtowns by leveraging local assets. The four focus areas are *Design, Organization, Promotion* and *Economic Restructuring*.

- **Design** means creating a safe, inviting environment for shoppers, workers, residents and visitors, while preserving a place's historic character.

- **Organization** creates consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among various groups and individuals that have a stake in the downtown commercial district.
- **Promotion** communicates a positive image that rekindles community pride and improves consumer and investor confidence in one's own downtown commercial district.
- **Economic Restructuring** strengthens commercial assets while diversifying Main Street's economic base to improve competitiveness.

Design is essential to the success of downtown revitalization efforts. Their physical organization and character are at the heart of what sets downtowns apart from other commercial districts.

Every moment experienced by visitors, from the time they enter downtown until the time they leave, is influenced by design decisions or the lack thereof. All of these experiences, large and small, add up to the downtown experience—for better or worse.

This manual is intended as a collection of best practices in downtown design to help Main Street Alabama (MSA) organizations, property owners and local governments maintain attractive, functional downtown historic areas and offer visitors a physically and visually inviting business environment. It is intended as a resource illustrating best practices. It is not intended to be used as a regulatory document,

### Design Principles

The following principles are essential to guiding design efforts as part of the Main Street Approach.

- Good design is good business.
- Appreciate and preserve historic buildings and materials.
- Be true to the style and time of the building.
- Do not re-create something that never was.
- Good design can exist in any era or architectural style.
- Downtowns developed over time and should not try to emulate one era or style.
- New buildings should be compatible with existing buildings.
- Quality matters.
- Good design is economically feasible.

though MSA communities may use the manual as a reference in the development of local guidelines or standards.

Generally, local governments are responsible for design decisions within street rights-of-way and

on public properties. Property owners are responsible for the design of buildings, parking lots and other privately owned spaces. This manual provides guidance to address the unique circumstances of each.

## B. How to Use the Design Manual

This Manual is organized into the following sections. (Note, the electronic version of the Manual includes hyperlinks to allow the reader to jump easily from one section to another. Click on the titles below to navigate to each section.)

1. **Introduction** explores the role of design in the context of downtown revitalization.
2. **Urban Design and Planning** explores the physical differences between downtowns and contemporary commercial development and provides guidance on how to reinforce a downtown's competitive advantages—walkability and sense of place.
3. **New Construction** provides guidance for new development and redevelopment involving the construction of new downtown buildings.
4. **Storefront Design** provides guidance on effective design and use of storefronts, signage, awnings, canopies and displays to attract patronage.
5. **Existing Buildings** explores the different eras of downtown architecture and provides guidance on their use, alterations and additions.
6. **Building Maintenance** provides guidance to extend the useful life of buildings from the different eras of downtown development.
7. **Graphics** provides guidance on the design of downtown branding and signage.
8. **Public Space and Art** provides guidance on the treatment of public and semi-public spaces to assure visitor comfort and a high quality downtown image.
9. **Demolition** provides guidance on evaluating potential demolition of existing buildings.
10. **Codes and Regulations** explores the various types of regulations that may be encountered during construction or renovation and their potential impact on investment in downtown buildings.

Also included in this Manual are **Tools and Resources** that can be used to achieve good design and promote preservation in your downtown.



## 2 Urban Design and Planning

Walkability is a critical design feature that distinguishes downtowns from contemporary commercial development. As downtown workers, residents, patrons and visitors, we are able to go about our business and leisure while immersed in the sights and sounds of our community. Our lives are enriched through encounters—intentional and by chance—with friends, merchants, and community leaders at the square, on the sidewalk, and in local shops. We know our surroundings better because we experience them at three miles per hour rather than thirty. Many things we need to do on a daily or weekly basis can be accomplished downtown without the frustration of traffic and moving our car from one parking lot to the next. All the while we're supporting local businesses, saving gas money and getting a little extra exercise.

### A. Downtown Structure and the Rise of the Automobile

Most downtowns throughout Alabama developed at a time when travel by foot, horse or trolley was more typical than travel by car. The street grids, blocks and lots—the DNA of our downtowns—were laid out by industrialists, bankers, real estate speculators and other

private interests. They were planned with economy in mind. Lots were platted *just* large enough for the buildings that would be built on them.

Many technological advances, including steel frame construction, indoor plumbing, elevators, and sanitary sewer systems, came along in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the benefit of downtowns. But, the personal automobile presented our downtowns with their biggest challenge.

As automobiles grew in popularity, it became necessary for downtowns to make room for them. Streets were paved and sidewalks and on-street parking spaces were installed in existing rights-of-way without impacting private property or buildings. Yet, there were no parking lots and few places to build them. So over time, buildings were demolished to make room for cars—not while cars were *in* use, but while they were *not*.

Despite the loss of many historic buildings, the DNA of our downtowns is still largely intact. And, that DNA—which allows us to experience and fully engage our community in person and on foot—still remains downtown's competitive advantage today.

The enclosed malls that developed after the 1950s took many cues from historic downtowns and main streets. The mall's large, central corridor lined with attractive storefronts is a direct descendant of main street. After the success of enclosed malls, some cities

attempted to revitalize their downtowns by emulating the enclosed malls by closing off streets to vehicular traffic. Unfortunately, these efforts typically did not have the desired effect. Downtown customers had become accustomed to parking within eye sight of their destinations and the mix of businesses along the pedestrian-only streets was not strong enough to draw adequate foot traffic.



*Dexter Avenue, Montgomery.* Original downtown streets were designed to be used freely by horse-drawn carts, pedestrians, and street cars. They were paved when cars became popular and most were already wide enough to accommodate travel lanes for cars, sidewalks and on-street parking.

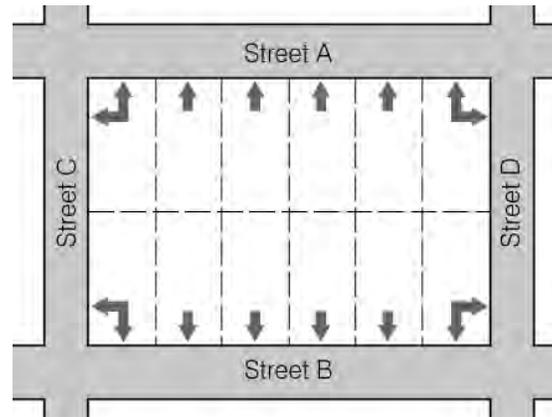
Small town downtowns are *urban* places just as their counterparts in big cities are. And, it is through *urban design* that buildings, streets and public spaces create a cohesive, functional and attractive downtown environment.

## B. Urban Design

The following best practices are intended to help downtowns retain their unique sense of place and walkability as changes are made through public and private reinvestment.

### 1. Take advantage of the downtown block pattern

Downtowns are typically made up of a street grid and rectangular blocks with lots on one side, or tier, of the block facing one street and the lots on the other tier facing the opposite direction. These are referred to as “double-tiered” blocks. The streets which have only corner lots fronting on them are considered side streets. “Multi-tiered blocks” have interior lots on more than two tiers. With frontage on two streets, corner lots are prized because they enjoy greater access and visibility.

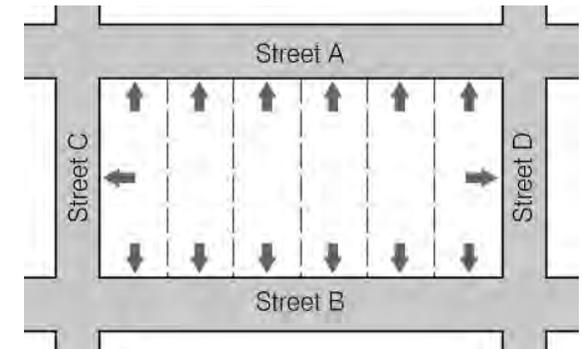


A typical downtown block is “double-tiered.” In the diagram above, all of the interior lots face either Street A and Street B and each corner lot faces two streets. In some cases, there may be interior lots that face Streets C and D.

A few Alabama downtowns were platted with alleys, while many others were not. Alleys provide an inconspicuous location for above-ground utilities, trash pick-up and access to parking and loading areas. Where present, alleys should be properly maintained so that downtown businesses may continue to utilize them for their intended purposes.

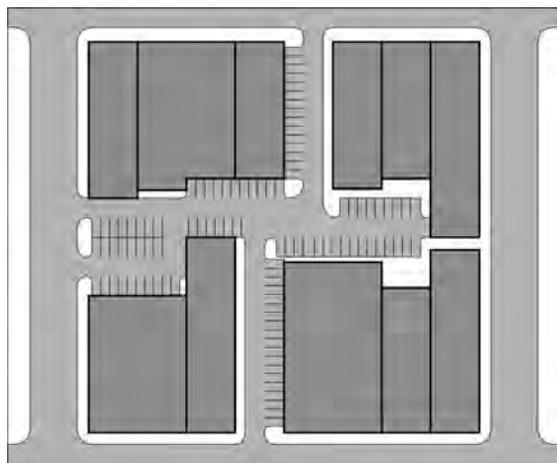
Single-tier blocks, in which interior lots have frontage on two streets, are relatively rare but occur in many downtowns throughout Alabama. Typically, buildings on these blocks were designed so that the front of the building faced one street and the rear of the building the other street. This arrangement placed the utilitarian and generally less attractive rear of buildings in public view. Where these conditions remain today, street-facing rear facades should be treated carefully and maintained to lessen

negative impacts on downtown’s image and adjacent properties, particularly those across the street that have a direct view of the rear of these lots.



Interior lots on “single-tiered” blocks front on two streets with all buildings generally facing the same street. Rear facades face the other. Corner lots on these blocks have three frontages.

In downtowns without alleys, on-site parking, loading and trash-pick up can be difficult to accommodate while maintaining a positive image and walkability, especially for blocks where original buildings occupy most or all of their lots. As reinvestment occurs on blocks without alleys, particularly when properties are redeveloped, efforts should be made to create parking and loading areas in the interior of the block that can be shared by adjoining buildings. This allows more efficient use of downtown property and enables building fronts to line the sidewalk rather than parking and loading areas.



It is possible to develop shared, internal parking and loading areas on blocks without alleys as redevelopment occurs. Vacant lots can be used for access and parking. Such changes should be guided by the need to keep building fronts along the street and parking and loading areas to the side or rear.

## 2. Place buildings to reinforce and enliven the streetscape and other public spaces

Buildings should generally extend to front property lines. In this way, the streetscape may be experienced as an outdoor room with building facades forming the walls of the room. This provides scale and proportion that is comfortable for the pedestrian. In contrast a pedestrian tends to feel isolated and out of place along a wide highway and disconnected from the buildings set far back from the roadway.



Proximity of downtown buildings to the streetscape creates a comfortable environment for pedestrians. Wide commercial roads and deep building setbacks create an inhospitable environment for travel on foot.

Building placement also can influence driving behavior. When buildings are located close to the street, drivers perceive the street as being narrower and drive more cautiously, which in turn, increases pedestrian safety and comfort.

With this pattern storefront displays and building entrances are located directly on the sidewalk, maximizing convenience for the window shopper. These elements also make the street environment visually engaging. Buildings with blank walls along the street—without displays, entrances or architectural character—create

dead space along the streetscape, which decreases pedestrian comfort.

## 3. Place parking and loading functions away from the street

To maintain an attractive and pedestrian-oriented downtown street environment, off-street parking and loading areas should be placed away from the street. Ideally, these functions can be placed to the rear of buildings and accessed from an alley or shared access drive. When this is not feasible, parking and loading areas may be located to the side of buildings. In these cases, a fence, wall or landscape screen should be installed to separate the parking or loading area from the sidewalk.

## 4. Carefully manage property access

Driveway access to individual properties can create undesirable conflicts with through traffic and with pedestrians when not properly managed. Driveways also take up needed on-street parking.

Driveways should be placed away from intersections to avoid congestion and safety issues. And, as much as possible, the number of driveways along a street frontage should be kept to a minimum. This can be done by using alleys or shared driveways for access. Curb cuts should be avoided on major streets; and direct access to a corner lot should be from the side street.

In the same way that pedestrians are normally only allowed to cross streets at intersections,

the locations where cars are allowed to cross the sidewalk should be controlled.

Driveways only should be as wide as necessary so that loss of on-street parking is minimized and the sidewalk system is not unduly compromised.

### 5. *Take advantage of vistas*

From time to time the layout of streets and blocks in downtowns creates sites that are able to be seen from a distance, the view framed by the buildings lining either side of the axis (usually a street). Most vistas are formed where a street terminates, often in a T-intersection or fork. Vistas may have been carefully planned when a downtown was originally laid out or occurred unintentionally where the street grid ends or changes. Planned vistas were typically created for civic buildings, monuments or churches, which may still be downtown landmarks today. Whether intentional or not, properties that terminate vistas have great visibility and both an opportunity and responsibility to take advantage of their unique location. Should a new building be considered for construction on a site terminating a vista, its placement should take advantage of the view(s) afforded by the location. Its design should respond to the importance and unique nature of the site.



Highlands United Methodist Church in Birmingham's Five Points South neighborhood terminates a vista along 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, creating a dramatic arrival experience into the walkable commercial district that surrounds the church.

## C. Planning

The following practices address uses of land and buildings and how they are arranged to generate and channel activity in downtown.

### 1. *Place shopping and dining in the core*

As downtown investors contemplate available sites for businesses or other functions, ground floor spaces at the center of downtown should be “reserved” for shopping and dining. Shops and restaurants require prominent locations and proximity to one another to be sustainable. Offices, business services, government facilities, downtown residences and places of worship do not require central locations and a concentration of other like activities to survive. These uses draw traffic to downtown and so should be adjacent to the downtown core. Offices and residences can be located in upper floors of buildings in the heart of downtown without taking up ground floor space for revenue generating activity.

### 2. *Place civic, recreational and entertainment facilities strategically*

From time to time cities have an opportunity to relocate or construct new government, recreational or entertainment facilities. Obviously, downtown should be considered first. City halls, courthouses and similar types of government facilities generate daily traffic downtown, which benefits downtown businesses. Similarly, urban parks, amphitheaters, ballparks, conference and convention facilities and other cultural destinations draw visitors that are likely to be interested in downtown shopping and dining. These should be located so that they support rather than draw activity away from or dilute shopping and dining activities. They are often large, require significant amounts of parking and may only be active at certain times—all of which should be taken into account when considering available locations.

### 3. *Place public parking strategically to support walkability*

Public parking lots should be placed in convenient but peripheral locations. In this way public parking users experience more of what downtown has to offer on as they walk to their primary (or first) destination. Parking structures can be integrated into downtown with more flexibility, especially when they are lined with active uses.

### 3 New Construction

The following section provides guidance for the design of new buildings in historic downtown areas. It is not the intent of this section to promote demolition of historic buildings for the purposes of redevelopment. For additions to existing buildings, refer to **Section 5, Existing Buildings**.

#### A. Context

Designing new buildings to fit the context of an historic downtown is necessary to maintain the integrity and character of the area, particularly from the perspective of customers, residents and other downtown devotees. This does not mean that new buildings must emulate the architectural style or period of historic buildings.

##### 1. Design for today

New buildings should not be designed to mimic architecture of the past. They should be *of their own time* yet take design cues from their surroundings—setback, height, scale, proportion, horizontal and vertical rhythms and organization.



The side addition (left) to Birmingham's Steiner Bank building shows how contemporary buildings, including additions to historic buildings, can reflect design elements of their historic neighbors without mimicking them.

##### 2. Maintain the predominant setback along the block face

Most building should adhere to the prevailing setback along the street, which will generally be near the back of the sidewalk. However, civic buildings may be set back to create gathering space and to emphasize the unique nature and importance of the building.

New buildings should not be set back from the street to accommodate front yard parking, even though that pattern may be present on the block.

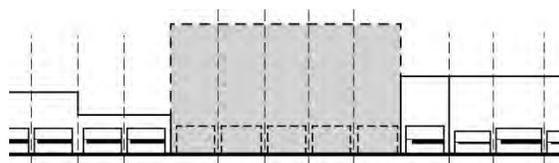
##### 3. Create continuity through expression lines, scale and rhythm

To create a sense of continuity, the design of new buildings should reflect the horizontal and vertical patterns created by adjacent historic buildings. The height of storefronts and placement of signs, windows, cornices and other horizontal elements can be continued in new façade designs without mimicking the style or architectural detail of neighboring facades.



The design of infill buildings should be influenced by "expression lines" of adjacent historic buildings.

Historic buildings typically reflect the structural divisions, i.e., width of column bays, in the design of their facades. This establishes a rhythm among the facades along a street, which new buildings should maintain. Structural divisions of historic buildings tended to be 25 feet. This corresponded with the typical width of downtown lots. These increments can be seen in the organization of wider building facades.



New buildings should continue the rhythm created by the structural divisions and facades of adjacent buildings.

If a new building is proposed that will greatly exceed the height of adjacent buildings, upper levels may be set back to lend a sense of continuity with existing buildings and de-emphasize the additional height.

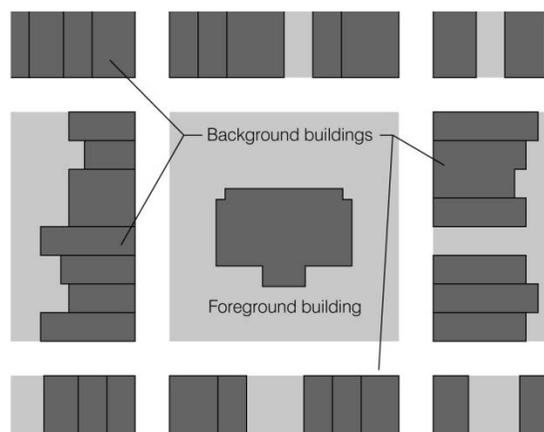
#### 4. Respond to building hierarchy

Downtown buildings can be divided into two hierarchical categories: *foreground buildings* and *background buildings*. Foreground buildings house important civic and community functions, have prominent locations and are architecturally unique. Their scale, massing, and placement, in particular, set them apart from other downtown buildings. An obvious example of this is a courthouse building sitting within a square at the center of downtown.

While the name might imply they are unimportant, background buildings are essential to downtown's sense of place and walkability. They create the order that is the very essence of downtown. Because they adhere closely to front lot lines, they define and give height to the streetscape. While foreground buildings tend to sit *in* space, background buildings create that space.

The design of new buildings must start with an understanding of whether the building is foreground or background, whether it will occupy space or create it. If there is any doubt, it is most likely a background building.

Foreground buildings may have more complex shapes and vertical massing. They also may be raised up above street level to emphasize grandeur.



The buildings that line a town square are considered background buildings. Together they form the walls of the square, the space in which a foreground building, such as a city hall or courthouse, sits.

Background buildings conform to the shape of their lots. And, their "duty" as background buildings does not require them to be plain. They may be as ornate and visually interesting as any foreground building.

## B. Facades

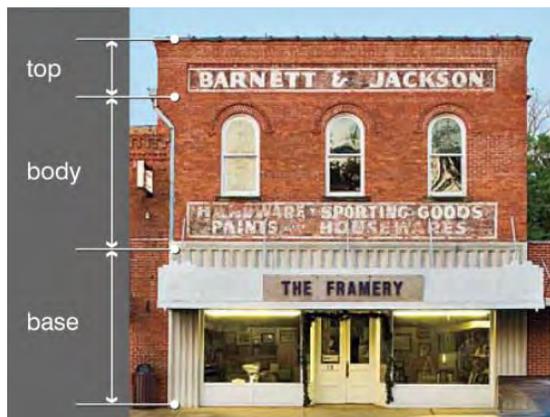
The facades of downtown buildings, historically, have similar organizational elements, which can be incorporated into the design of new building fronts. Historic building facades typically include a *base*, *body* and *top*. This pattern is evident in both single-story and multi-story buildings.

### 1. Design new building facades with a "base, body and top"

The base includes the base plate and bulkhead (single-story buildings) or the first floor façade or storefront (multi-story buildings). The body includes the merchandise/window display and sign band (single-story buildings) or the upper story façade (multi-story buildings). The top includes the parapet and cornice (flat roofs) or the eave and roof structure (pitched roofs). The top of buildings over three or four stories often includes the façade of the uppermost floor in addition to the roof.



Base, body and top of a single-story building



Base, body and top of a two-story building

Towers, pilasters and other vertical elements may span the base, body and/or top to create vertical emphasis.

**2. Avoid “blank walls”**

Building facades that face public streets should have windows, entrances and an adequate level of architectural articulation to support a visually engaging streetscape. This applies primarily to the ground level portion of facades. Large walls spans without these elements can create psychological “dead space” in the same way that vacant lots and buildings do, which reduces pedestrian comfort.



Building facades without windows, entrances or other forms of articulation create an unappealing environment that pedestrians tend to avoid.

In addition to windows and entrances, projections, recesses, belt courses, signage, lighting and changes in material and color can be used to add visual interest to building facades.

**3. Provide “eyes on the street”**

Windows and entryways provide a visual connection between passersby and activities within buildings. This is an important safety feature. By creating opportunities for “natural surveillance,” the design of buildings can discourage undesirable activities in adjoining public spaces.



When buildings have windows and entrances facing streets and other public spaces, building occupants provide “eyes on the street” to discourage inappropriate behavior.

**4. Provide attractive rear facades**

Rear facades should match the dominant materials used on street-facing facades of the building, though the design may be simpler. The level of design and upkeep should increase with the degree to which the facade is visible from public streets and the degree to which it is intended for public access.

Signage and/or awnings may be helpful in identifying a rear public entrance.

Trash collection, utility boxes and similar elements should be screened where possible and maintained in a clean, orderly condition.



This rear entrance is well maintained and includes signage and a small awning to help identify it.

### C. Adaptability

With few exceptions buildings tend to outlive the original purposes or tenants for which they were constructed. Commercial buildings should be designed with flexibility in mind so that, in the future, they may be efficiently adapted to new uses and tenants.

### D. Materials and Colors

Historic downtown buildings typically have masonry exteriors, either brick or stone, determined largely upon the architectural style of each building. Storefronts, door and window frames were typically wood. Cast iron, cast stone, terra cotta, bronze, marble, pressed metal and other materials can be seen in the facades of historic commercial and civic buildings.

#### 1. *Select compatible, durable materials*

Many of the exterior materials used in historic buildings are still widely used today. Brick, stone and other masonry materials are highly appropriate for contemporary buildings. Advances in building technology and materials have expanded the palette and manner of installation of exterior building materials.

But not all materials—new or old—are equally appropriate for new buildings in a historic downtown. Generally, wood and vinyl siding, wood panelling, plain concrete block and Exterior Insulation Finish Systems (EIFS) are not appropriate for use on building facades. Wood siding, for example, is considered almost exclusively a residential exterior material and appears out-of-context on a downtown building.

Asphalt and wood shingles and dark-tinted and mirrored glass are generally inappropriate for use on facades of new buildings.

Designers have developed compelling ways to use corrugated metal on building facades. Unfortunately, metal siding can also be easily misused and so should be selected cautiously.



Metal siding used creatively in contemporary commercial building (CCR Architects)

#### 2. *Select compatible building colors*

Modest or muted colors will tend to be more compatible with those used on the exteriors of adjacent buildings. The color scheme of new buildings should be limited to no more than three colors with the natural color of the dominant building material being primary. Two additional colors may be chosen for trim materials, architectural details, and awnings.

Paint manufacturers typically offer “heritage” or “historic” color lines that may be useful in selecting paint colors compatible with neighboring historic buildings.

Bright colors should generally be avoided as they can appear cheap and garish. In exceptional cases, brighter colors may be appropriate but require careful design and use. Bright or bold colors can be used successfully in signs, awnings, canopies and similar

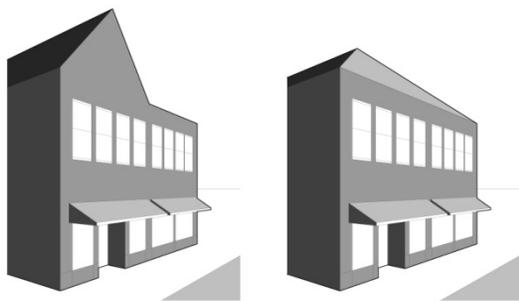
elements as accents to the overall color scheme of the building.

## E. Roof Design

Roof design is an often overlooked component of downtown building design, in part, because so many historic downtown buildings have flat roofs concealed behind parapets. But pitched roofs are also highly appropriate downtown.

### 1. Use roof form to accentuate building height

Gables facing toward the street increase the perceived height of a building while hip roofs de-emphasize building height. It is generally more desirable to accentuate building height through street-facing gables. It may be desirable to use a hip roof along the side of a building so that the overall height of the building appears to step down to be more compatible with a shorter, adjacent building.



A gable roof (left) accentuates height while a hip roof (right) de-emphasizes height.

Roof pitches should generally have a slope of at least 5:12 unless concealed behind a parapet.

### 2. Articulate roof lines

When long, pitched-roof forms face the street, include gables, dormers, changes in the ridge line and similar roof elements to visually break down the overall size of the roof and enhance street views of the building.

### 3. Select compatible roofing materials

Roof materials and color for pitched roofs that are visible from the street should be compatible with the building's architectural style and with that of adjacent buildings. Shingle, shake and standing seam metal are generally appropriate. Tile roofs may also be appropriate where other instances of tile roofs occurred historically in the downtown.

## F. Entrances

Building entrances are an important part of a visitor's impression of a building and the business or other function it contains.

### 1. Place entrances along the street

New buildings should be designed so that their entrances will face the street rather than the parking lot. This makes walking from place to place more convenient, enhances business legibility, and assures a more engaging front façade. Side or rear entrances may be used in addition to a main street entrance.

Corner buildings should have entrances along or near the corner to take advantage of visibility from both streets. Whenever a corner building

has significant frontage on both streets, one or more entrances on each facade should be considered. This only may be practical for certain uses or when the building contains multiple tenants.

### 2. Recess entrances along the sidewalk

When buildings extend to the back of sidewalk, entrances should be recessed. This allows doors to swing outward without obstructing the sidewalk. Recessed entries also create additional space for merchandise displays along the storefront.



Recessed entrances allow the door to swing outward without encroaching into pedestrian space along the sidewalk.

### 3. Select compatible door styles

The type or style door used along the front façade should be compatible with the architectural style of the building and the businesses or other functions it houses. Metal and wood-framed glass doors are appropriate for most building styles and uses. Doors that include little glass area are generally only

compatible with certain architectural styles and building uses (e.g., churches and dwellings).

Public, main entrances should be easily distinguishable from service entrances when both are located on the same façade. Service entrances may use solid doors with little or no glass area.

## G. Windows

Windows provide merchandise display area, enliven building facades and help buildings engage the street.

### 1. Maximize window area at ground level

Window area in the ground level façade, or storefront, should be maximized to the degree suitable to the uses contained in the first floor of the building. This provides visual access between the activities within buildings and passersby, supporting walkability. In particular large window areas are essential to shopping and dining uses. Buildings with generous ground floor windows can house a variety of uses.

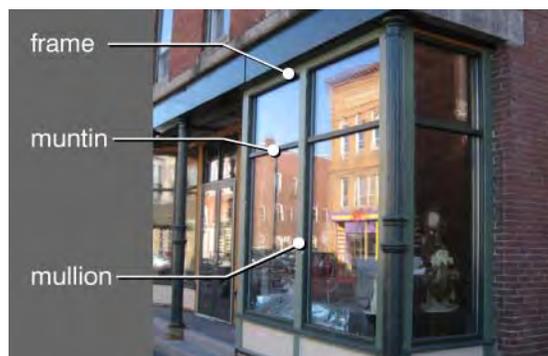
Transom windows, placed above merchandise windows allow sunlight deeper into the building, which can reduce reliance on artificial lighting. Operable transoms can also be used to allow outside air circulation for cooling during warmer seasons.



An uncovered transom allows natural light deep into the building.

### 2. Recess windows from wall plane

Window frames of historic buildings are set back from the exterior wall plane. This gives the façade a sense of depth and so this should be incorporated in new facades. Similarly, window frames, mullions and muntins should have a thickness that projects outward from the surface of window glass.



Mullions define units of a window and sometimes serve as a supporting member. Muntins separate individual panes of glass in a window.

### 3. Use clear window glass

To accommodate retail displays and visual interaction between passersby and building inhabitants, windows should be clear glass. Dark-tinted and mirrored glass should be avoided, particularly at ground level.

Curtains, blinds or other interior window covers can be used when privacy is a concern, and awnings or canopies can be used for shade.

### 4. Use vertically proportioned upper-story windows

Historic multistory buildings feature vertically proportioned windows in the upper portions of the façade. New buildings should likewise feature vertically-proportioned windows. However, horizontal bands of windows and shorter, wider windows are sometimes featured in more contemporary architectural styles. These design features may be accommodated while observing the vertical pattern and rhythm in adjacent buildings by using mullions to divide wide window spans into multiple, vertically-proportioned windows.



Upper story windows of historic buildings typically had vertical proportions. Horizontally-proportioned window openings generally had two or more windows within them.

## H. Canopies and Awnings

Canopies and awnings provide shade and rain protection for pedestrians and are used to block glare from direct sunlight in interior spaces. They also help to accentuate the ground floor façade, or storefront and main entrances. For specific guidance on canopies and awnings, see [Section 4, Storefront Design](#).

## I. Parking

New buildings should be arranged on site so that parking and loading areas may be placed to the rear or side of the building rather than between the building and a street. Parking and loading areas should have access from shared driveways or alleys, when present.

Where possible, off-street parking areas should be created collectively among adjoining

properties to achieve greater efficiency in lot design.

### 1. Recess gates

The entrance to gated parking facilities should be recessed from the sidewalk so that a car stopped at the gate before entering does not straddle the sidewalk. This includes parking structures as well as surface lots.



This parking lot entrance gate is set back so that a car entering the lot does not block the sidewalk.

### 2. Break down the scale of large lots

Internal landscaping is used in large surface parking lots to provide shade and maintain a comfortable pedestrian scale. Interior landscaping typically includes islands or peninsulas surfaced with mulch, grass or other ground cover and planted with trees. Shrubs and flowers may also be used.

### 3. Use planting beds to absorb stormwater

Peninsulas and islands are often bounded by a curb to prevent cars from encroaching into

planting beds, though other designs may be appropriate. In fact, curbs can prevent stormwater from draining into planting beds, which is very desirable. Allowing stormwater to drain into landscape areas helps on-site absorption of rainwater and simultaneously helps plants grow.

When mulch or similar ground cover is used, a curb or other barrier may be necessary to keep the material in the planting bed. If curbs are used, they should be designed to allow stormwater to drain into the bed.



Planting beds in parking lots can be designed to filter and absorb stormwater.

For more information on parking, refer to [Section 2, Urban Design and Planning](#).

## J. Landscaping

While landscaping is desirable to provide texture, shade, color and pervious areas for stormwater absorption, most landscaping should occur within the streetscape. Other than foreground buildings, downtown buildings do not have lawns, nor do they need landscaping around their perimeters. But whenever parking lots are adjacent to the sidewalk, landscaping should separate the two.

### 1. Screen on-site parking from the street

The primary intent of this is to create a visual screen that maintains the building line along the sidewalk. This can be done through a masonry wall, a hedge or a combination of an ornamental fence with shrubs or other vegetation.



Parking lots should be screened from the sidewalk to maintain the building line along the street. Screens can also limit access to designated locations for security purposes.

### 2. Provide interior landscaping in large parking areas

Interior landscaping should be provided within large parking lots to provide shade and vertical definition. At the end of parking aisles, for example, landscape islands should be provided with ground cover and shade trees.



Islands at the end of parking aisles are an efficient way to incorporate landscaping and shade trees. Larger trees require larger islands to accommodate root growth and assure the long-term health of trees.

### 3. Use low-maintenance plants

Native and drought-tolerant plants tend to remain healthy without irrigation and therefore pose lower installation and maintenance costs. Low growing shrubs and ground covers that cause litter and other debris to accumulate should be avoided.

## K. Lighting

Lighting for new downtown developments should help provide safe, even lighting levels along the streetscape and within parking areas.

### 1. Prevent light spillover and glare

Whether building-mounted or freestanding, lighting fixtures should be a “cutoff” type, which are shielded so that light is cast downward rather than above the fixture or in all directions. This prevents unwanted light spillover on adjacent properties and glare that can interfere with drivers on adjoining streets. Ground-mounted lights should be angled away from sidewalks, paths and drives so as not to interfere with the vision of drivers and pedestrians.



Non cutoff fixtures should not be used to light large areas but may be appropriate for accent lighting or in the interior of a site. Cutoff fixtures can light large areas while reducing glare.

## 2. Use “true color” lights

Exterior light sources that discolor the objects they illuminate should be avoided. Instead, “true color” or “natural” light sources are recommended. This can be determined by the light’s Color Rendering Index (CRI), which has a scale of 0-100 with natural outdoor lighting being at the top of the scale.

## 3. Use lower-height freestanding light fixtures

In parking areas and other exterior spaces, freestanding light fixtures should not exceed 25 feet in height. Lower-height fixtures provide comfortable, even lighting levels and are less likely to cause light spillover and glare than taller, high-powered lights. A greater number of lights will be needed with larger exterior spaces.



LED and solar-powered lighting are available to reduce energy costs while maintaining lighting levels and quality.

## L. Accessibility

New buildings must comply with the accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These requirements are detailed in the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG). Property owners should consult with a design professional to determine how ADA requirements may apply to proposed new buildings or additions.

## 4 Storefront Design

Storefronts are the ground level façade of buildings containing retail shops, restaurants and personal service establishments. The following best practices apply to the design of storefronts for new buildings and alterations to existing buildings.

### A. Storefront Architecture

Storefronts are traditionally composed almost entirely of glass to afford generous area for merchandise displays and to allow visual access between the people and activities within the building and those outside. The window area is framed by awnings and signage above and below, by a bulkhead where the storefront meets the sidewalk.

#### 1. Design the storefront to feature a base, body and top

Just as building facades feature a “base, body and top” (see [Section 3-B, Facades](#)), storefronts reflect a similar organization. The bulkhead acts as the “base”, the merchandise or storefront window is the “body” and the transom, awning or signage area “top” off the storefront.



Historically, storefronts included bulkheads of 18”-36” in height below display windows. These were typically recessed wood panels though masonry, cast iron, tile and other materials were also used. Bulkheads often concealed interior storage cabinets on top of which merchandise displays were installed.

#### 2. Create continuity through expression lines, scale and rhythm

The alignment, proportion and rhythm of storefront elements—windows, doors, bulkhead, awnings and sign band—should be consistent with those of adjacent buildings.

#### 3. Maximize window area

Storefronts should include generous areas of clear glass to encourage window shopping and give passersby a visual taste of the business activities within the building. Forty percent or more of the storefront should be glass.

Thermal glazing with clear or low E-rating glass reduces heat gain from large window areas.

Historic storefronts also include a transom, a row of windows above the display windows. These windows allowed sunlight to reach deep

into the interior of the building. Retractable awnings helped control heat gain and glare from direct sunlight. Operable transom windows allowed cross-ventilation for cooling during warmer months. These same methods can be used today to manage energy use for lighting and temperature control.

#### 4. Recess entrances along the sidewalk

When buildings extend to the back of sidewalk, entrances should be recessed. This allows doors to swing outward without obstructing the sidewalk. Recessed entries also create additional space for merchandise displays along the storefront.

### B. Building Signage

Storefront signage traditionally includes three main types. Wall signs are attached to the front façade in a traditional sign band above the awning/transom. Window signs are painted or affixed to display windows. Projecting or blade signs extend outward from the building perpendicularly so that they can be seen easily from the sidewalk or down the street. Signs also may be included on awnings. Depending on the type of awning however, these may be less effective.

#### 1. Place signs on new and existing buildings in traditional locations

Downtown business signs should be designed and placed so that they are visible to pedestrians, including those on the sidewalk and those across the street. This also allows

signs to be visible from cars traveling by at slower speeds. Freestanding signs are generally not appropriate—these are used to attract attention of motorists traveling at higher speeds in highway and suburban commercial areas.

Signs should generally not be located on the upper facade of multistory buildings. This draws the eye away from the storefront where attention should be focused.

## 2. Avoid sign clutter

There should be one primary sign per storefront (corner buildings have two storefronts). Additional signs may be used—as allowed under local regulations—but should be much smaller than the primary sign. For example, when a wall sign is used in combination with window signs, generally, the wall sign should be dominant and of a size that allows it to be read easily and quickly from a distance. In such a case the window sign should not compete with the wall sign for attention but be large enough to be read by those walking past the storefront.

Overly large wall signs can appear garish and make the overall storefront appear small and cramped, in comparison. Similarly, window signs should not be so large that they obscure the display area.



A primary wall sign can be seen from the street and from across the street. Secondary window signs are noticed by those passing by on foot.

Temporary window signs placed on the interior surface of storefront windows should be used sparingly. Local sign regulations often limit this to 20-25% of the window area.

## 3. Design signage for legibility

Signs must be legible—able to be read easily by the intended audience. The selection of sign color, type of illumination, size and typeface determine how legible a sign is. Lettering color should contrast with the sign background; and sign color scheme should be compatible with the colors of the building. Intricate or flowery typefaces can make it difficult for a viewer to read a sign, especially from a moving car.

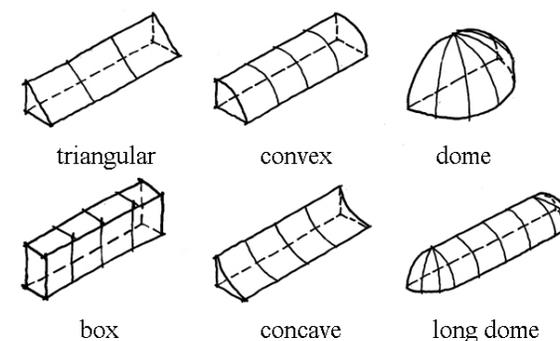
Internally lit signs are generally the most legible of the different types of sign lighting. Appropriateness of internally lit signs varies from one community to another. Externally lit signs, with spotlights directed on the sign message, are generally more historically appropriate than back-lit signs.

## C. Awnings

Awnings provide shade and rain protection along the sidewalk, reduce glare from direct sunlight and visually enhance storefronts. They can also be used for signage.

### 1. Select compatible awning color, shape and size

The size and shape of awnings should be consistent with the overall building design and fit the window opening. Awnings should not extend across multiple window openings or obscure architectural features.



Awnings come in six standard shapes. Using the same awning shape and size helps maintain a cohesive look when a building contains multiple tenants.

Generally, all awnings on a building should be the same shape and color (or colored pattern). For buildings with multiple ground floor tenants, it is possible to use more than one awning color provided the color selections are subtle and remain consistent with the building design of the

building and the shape and size of the awnings are otherwise uniform.



Awnings add variety and color to downtown sidewalks. While an awning on one building may be different from that of other buildings, awnings on the same building should be related in color, shape and size.

Historically, fixed and retractable awnings are both appropriate. Retractable awnings allow tenants/owners control over the amount of sunlight that enters the interior of the building. Fixed awning frames should incorporate the body of the awning only; the valance of the awnings should not be fixed or rigid.

## 2. Select compatible awning materials

Fabric, canvas and vinyl are appropriate materials for awnings. Wood and aluminum awnings tend to be less appropriate though there may be some innovative designs suitable to more contemporary façade designs. Plastic and shingled awnings are generally not appropriate. Shiny or high gloss finishes on fabric, canvas or vinyl awnings should be avoided.

## 3. Use compatible lighting method

Back-lit awnings are generally not appropriate. If lighting an awning is desired, spotlights directed on the awning may be mounted on the building facade.



Back-lit awnings are generally inappropriate in a downtown setting.

## 4. Maintain clear sidewalk space

A clear height of at least seven (7) feet between the bottom of the awning and the sidewalk should be provided. Seven and one-half (7.5) or eight (8) feet is preferred.

## D. Canopies

Like awnings, canopies provide shade and rain protection and can reduce glare from sunlight. They are also appropriate locations for business signage.

### 1. Place and size canopy for desired sun exposure

Canopies typically extend further from the façade than awnings and so they cast more of the storefront in shadow at midday. This can be problematic for businesses that depend on visibility. The depth of canopies and their height



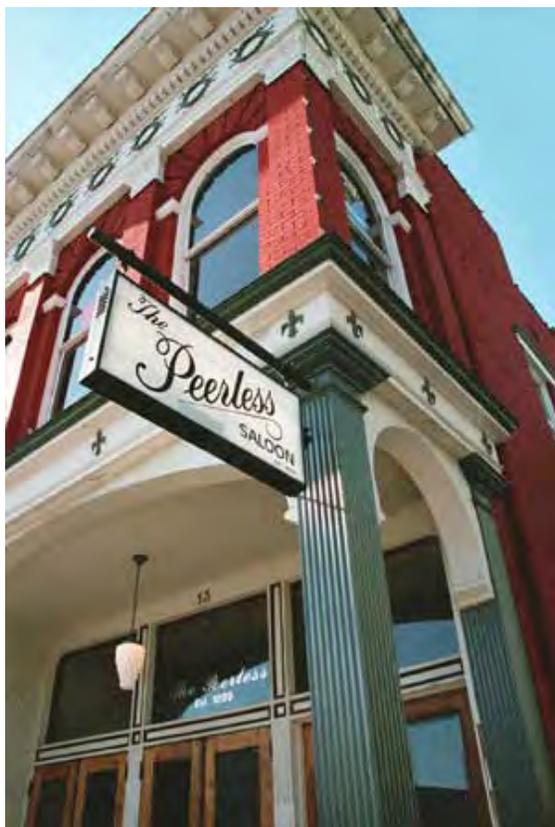
In contrast to awnings, canopies are mostly horizontal and tend to be less prominent parts of the façade design. Some Alabama communities have canopies that extend the length of some downtown blocks.

on the façade should be determined with consideration given to daytime shadows and rain cover. The higher the canopy is placed on the façade and the shallower the canopy, the less shadow is created on storefront windows yet less protection from rain is provided. Canopies with transparent roofs may be appropriate, with certain building designs, to avoid excessive shadows while still providing rain cover.

### 2. Maintain clear sidewalk space

A clear height of at least seven (7) feet between the bottom of the canopy and the sidewalk should be provided. Seven and one-half (7.5) or eight (8) feet is preferred.

## 5 Existing Buildings



One of the inherent values of downtown commercial buildings is their adaptability—typical early commercial buildings had simple floorplans allowing them to be reused for new functions. The ease of adapting existing buildings to new tenants and uses is an

important economic reason for preserving downtown buildings. Throughout Alabama's downtowns, early commercial buildings have been adaptively reused time and time again over the decades.

It was not until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that downtown commercial buildings were designed with more idiosyncratic shapes, floorplans and locations on site that now limit their reuse. These later buildings were designed this way for stylistic reasons, to conform to franchise standards, and/or to suit new business types that emerged to more conveniently serve the driving public.

The following section describes three important eras in the development of Alabama's downtown buildings and provides guidance on how downtown/neighborhood districts can reinvest in these buildings while, at the same time, protect their historic qualities.

It should be noted that not all *old* buildings are *historic*. Some buildings that could otherwise be considered historic have been altered to such an extent over time that their original historic qualities are all but gone. Other buildings were designed in such a utilitarian manner that they are simply devoid of distinguishing architectural features. While the guidance in this section is primarily geared toward "historic" buildings and their preservation, these practices can be applied—albeit more loosely—to non-historic buildings as well.

### A. Buildings Built Before 1920

The mid to late 1800s were an important time for the development of downtowns throughout the state. By 1920 most Alabama downtowns were either growing or fully developed. Buildings constructed prior to 1920 established the walkable pattern and historic appeal that continue to draw us downtown today.

#### Building Components

##### 1. Site Placement/Orientation

Commercial buildings of this era were placed at the edge of the street and extended the full width—and often, the depth—of their lots. Building entrances were located along the sidewalk for customers and deliveries, alike. In downtowns with alleys, service entrances were located at the rear of buildings.

Civic buildings often were set back from the street surrounded by lawns. Many of Alabama's original county courthouses were located in a square at the center of downtown. Religious buildings and other places of assembly were also often set back from the street to reflect the importance of the building and to provide space for people to congregate before and after events.

##### 2. Structure

Commercial buildings typically featured masonry bearing walls with wood or concrete beams, brick or concrete columns and wood or concrete floors. Cast iron also was used in

commercial structures up until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when technological advances made steel affordable for building construction.

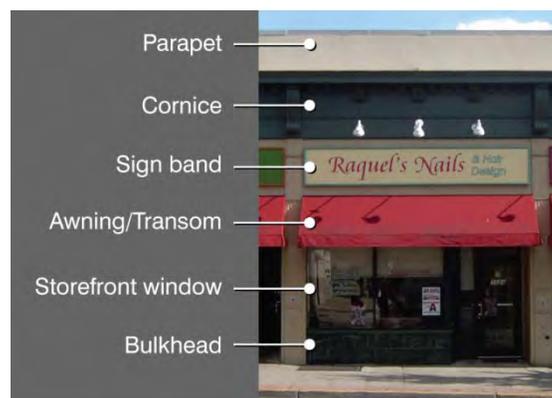
### 3. Architectural Style

Commercial buildings built before 1920 were influenced by a variety of historic architectural styles. They were stylistically modest compared to government and religious buildings, which were more representative of the Neoclassical, Victorian, Gothic and other Revival styles. The stripped-down, vernacular translation of historic architectural styles became known as Early Commercial or 19<sup>th</sup> Century Commercial. Most of these buildings were brick with varying levels of ornamentation. More elaborate building designs, particularly civic buildings, featured stone and terra cotta finishes.



### 4. Facades

This era of commercial building design defined what would become the traditional storefront, which consisted of a bulkhead, window display, transom, sign band, cornice and parapet.



Early commercial facades included a bulkhead, storefront/merchandise window, an awning/transom, sign band and a parapet (flat roof buildings). Historic commercial buildings often included a decorative cornice between the transom and parapet.

Retractable or fixed, fabric awnings projected from historic building facades providing rain cover for window shoppers and shade from direct sun.

Window and door frames were almost exclusively wood. Upper-story windows were vertically proportioned—consistent with the tall floor-to-ceiling heights of upper floors—with one-over-one or two-over-two window sashes.

Most buildings had “flat” roofs concealed behind a parapet at the top of the building. These roofs had slight pitches designed to drain water to downspouts at the rear of buildings. Decorative cornices embellished the top of the façade of flat roof buildings and were often influenced by Neoclassical architecture. Civic and other foreground buildings, because they were freestanding, typically had pitched, shingle or tile roofs.



Cornices on early commercial buildings varied from simple to elaborate.

### 5. Signs

Signs typically appeared on awnings and windows and within cornices. Some buildings featured blade signs projecting outward from the façade able to be read from a distance along the sidewalk. Signs also were painted on upper facades or within upper story windows.



Window signs attract the attention of people passing by on the sidewalk.

## B. Buildings Built from 1920-1950

This era saw the integration of automobiles into the downtown environment ushered in through the paving of streets. While the majority of new buildings continued to be built at the street's edge, new businesses and building types emerged that were designed specifically for automotive access.

### Building Components

#### 1. Site Placement/Orientation

Downtown development from 1920-1950 continued the tradition of placing buildings and their entrances along the sidewalk. Civic and community buildings, as in the past, were often designed as foreground buildings surrounded by lawns or plazas.

During this era, a few buildings were designed to accommodate automobiles on-site, particularly service stations. These tended to be located at the edges of downtown and were often on corner lots, which allowed vehicular access from two streets. Unlike today's gas stations, these service stations were relatively close to the street with only a modest apron for vehicles in front of the building.

#### 2. Structure

Commercial buildings typically featured masonry bearing walls with steel or concrete beams and columns and cast concrete floors. However, a few commercial buildings were wood-framed; and other buildings began to

feature "curtain wall" construction. This technique included steel framing and non-structural walls, which allowed flexibility in the choice of exterior materials.

#### 3. Architectural Style

The earliest buildings from this era were consistent with those of earlier buildings, while emerging architectural styles began to deviate from those precedents—in particular, Art Deco, Art Moderne and International Style. The adoption of emerging styles lagged behind in smaller cities, where they tended to be interpreted in a more simplistic manner. However, there are highly representative examples of these styles in Alabama's downtowns.



Jos. A. Bank and other businesses now occupy this early Art Deco building in downtown Florence, Alabama.

- a. **Art Deco** buildings emphasized verticality through the shape and placement of openings in the façade and through vertical

bands of stone and terra cotta ornamentation. Ornamental motifs were modern and angular in contrast to the curvilinear and organic details used in Neoclassical and Art Nouveau styles.

- b. **Art Moderne** buildings featured a "streamlined" aesthetic, horizontal emphasis and rounded corners. Horizontal emphasis was achieved through taller bulkheads, horizontally-proportioned storefront windows, and horizontal bands of windows and materials. Less emphasis was placed on the upper façade of multi-story buildings to further emphasize horizontality. Upper-story windows were arranged in ribbons or in a repeating rhythm that departed from the traditional symmetrical arrangement of older buildings.



S.H. Kress & Co. built retail stores in the downtowns of towns and cities throughout the United States like this Art Moderne building in downtown Birmingham. The company believed their stores should be "works of public art that would contribute to the cityscape."

- c. **International Style** buildings ignored historic architectural precedents, instead featuring asymmetric facades without ornamentation. Glass curtain walls were often contrasted with unit masonry or metal-paneled solid walls to create a clean, modern appearance. Similar to Art Moderne buildings, the International Style tended to emphasize horizontality.



The updated façade of the Life Insurance Company building in Downtown Gadsden was heavily influenced by International Style architecture.

The horizontal emphasis of Art Moderne and International Styles came with lower floor-to-ceiling heights. Prior to mechanical air conditioning, older buildings relied on higher ceilings for ventilation and natural cooling. As new buildings were provided with mechanical heating and cooling systems, lower ceiling heights allowed

temperatures to be controlled more efficiently.

#### 4. Facades

Generally, buildings from this era maintained the storefront organization and features of older buildings, though emerging architectural styles put a new spin on some of these elements. More horizontally-proportioned display windows sat higher in the façade above taller bulkheads. Entries were more deeply recessed creating additional display area. Transoms featured patterned or prismatic glass.

Designers used aluminum more widely for door and window framing. Upper floor windows were often placed in pairs or aligned in horizontal ribbons. Window surrounds were minimal. Thin, metal window frames lent a sleek, modern feeling to building facades.



Now ubiquitous, aluminum framing began being used on new and existing storefronts in the 1930s.

Cornices tended to be ornamental brickwork, terra cotta and cast stone. The level of ornamentation declined as modern architectural styles did away with cornices completely.

#### 5. Signs

Signs continued to appear in windows and awnings to draw the attention of pedestrians, but—with the emergence of the automobile—larger signs grew popular. Larger signs could be read by those driving down the street but required space on facades that had not been necessary before. Newer buildings were designed with signage in mind—a horizontal band above the storefront was reserved for building signs. The widespread construction of movie palaces and theaters introduced the nation to elaborate marquee signs that project out from the building façade and, like canopies, provide rain cover for those waiting in ticket lines.

#### C. Buildings Built From 1950-1980

By the 1950s the departure from traditional architectural and urban design practices had become the norm in Alabama's downtowns and main streets. This dramatic change was brought on by a growing belief that business areas must be car-oriented to thrive in the future. This philosophy was institutionalized by the adoption of zoning rules that forced new construction in downtowns to comply with setback and parking requirements that were equally applied in new commercial areas.

## Building Components

### 1. Site Placement/Orientation

As downtown buildings aged and the demand for parking space became more pressing, older buildings were demolished. In their place modern buildings and parking lots were developed. New buildings were often set away from the street to comply with zoning requirements. Parking lots were placed in front or to the side of new buildings. In some cases, parking and loading areas surround all sides of newer buildings. This was particularly true for restaurants, banks, and other buildings with drive-through services. To accommodate the additional space required for cars, new developments often took up multiple lots. This also allowed buildings to be spread out horizontally.

### 2. Structure

Commercial buildings of this era typically featured “curtain wall” construction. This technique included steel framing and non-structural walls, which allowed flexibility in the choice of exterior materials.

### 3. Architectural Style

Modern buildings of this era represented a number of architectural styles including International Style, Formalism, Brutalism, Expressionism and Postmodernism, most of which avoided traditional design elements. In particular, the new styles changed the way in which buildings would “meet the street.” The

traditional rules for ground level facades and storefronts of earlier commercial buildings ensured direct physical and visual connections between the building, storefront displays and pedestrians. This connection, which was essential to downtown commerce, became lost with the construction of new, modern buildings.

- a. **International Style** emerged before 1950 and became increasingly popular among developers, in part, because its lack of ornamentation was economical. International Style buildings featured simple, boxy shapes; extensive window area; smooth, clean walls; and cantilevers.
- b. **Formalism** evolved from the International Style, reinstating—albeit in an abstract fashion—elements of classical architecture, particularly vertical emphasis and symmetry. This style most commonly appeared in banks and public buildings.



The Madison County Courthouse is one of several Formalist buildings in Alabama’s downtowns.

- c. **Brutalism** is generally characterized by rough-surfaced concrete walls and deeply recessed windows. The style was mostly

used in governmental and institutional buildings to give the impression of strength. The name is derived from the French term for raw concrete, *béton brut*.



The Colonial Plaza Building in downtown Birmingham is one of a few Brutalist commercial buildings in Alabama.

- d. **Expressionism** is characterized by sweeping curved roofs and walls and arched or vaulted spaces. Expressionist buildings often abstractly represented their function through their overall shape and outward appearance. Symmetry and simple geometries were typically avoided in Expressionism, which was featured only in very special public or institutional buildings.



The First Baptist Church in Huntsville is one of a very few Alabama buildings showcasing the Expressionist style.

- e. *Postmodernism* developed as a style in the latter part of this era, bridging the gap between modern and historic architecture. Postmodernism integrated historic, often classically-influenced, yet abstracted, forms into modern architecture—columns, pediments, roof gables, etc. Due in part to the popular views of modern architecture being cold and devoid of cultural context, postmodernism attempted to bring “meaning” back into building design by referencing historic features, including ornamentation, that western culture associated with welcoming, pleasant architecture.

These styles appeared in their purest form mostly in large cities. However, the continued departure from historic design—particularly the Early Commercial style, in the context of downtown buildings—encouraged developers and architects of downtown buildings in cities large and small to disregard some design

elements that are recognized today as essential to downtown commercial design.



The post-modern RSA Tower in downtown Montgomery integrates elements from classical architecture within an overall contemporary design.

The widespread use of curtain wall construction, greater availability of non-regional building materials and disregard of historic design had much more of an impact on Alabama’s downtowns than any modern architectural style.

#### 4. *Facades*

The facades of commercial buildings from this era were greatly influenced by the economy and flexibility of curtain wall construction. Storefronts were mostly glass as steel frames could span greater distances without masonry piers to support the weight of the upper façade. Electric lighting and mechanical ventilation and cooling systems made transoms all but unnecessary, which also allowed floor-to-floor heights to be lower. In most storefronts, bulkheads disappeared entirely. In a few buildings, the bulkhead was raised to eye level to focus window shoppers’ attention on smaller displays.

Windows and doors were enclosed in thin metal frames. Upper story windows were arranged in horizontal bands or in grids—the symmetry of Early Commercial buildings had become “old-fashioned.” Entrances were either deeply recessed or flush with the front façade and covered by a projecting canopy. Awnings were replaced by metal canopies.

Commercial buildings from this era tended not to have a cornice or other design feature “terminating” the façade at the top of the building. Of those that did, the detail tended to be very simple and flat.



The design of modern commercial buildings tended to either omit or provide only a very simplified “top” element.

Several new building materials were used in this era, some of which were designed to speed construction and reduce labor. Exterior Insulation Finish Systems (EIFS) is one such material which has risen in popularity due to low cost, fast installation and a “stucco” finish appearance.

#### 5. *Signs*

Modern commercial buildings were designed with attached signage in mind—typically, a

horizontal band above the storefront was reserved for building signs. Signs attached to buildings tended to be larger than in the past because they were intended to be read by motorists passing at greater speeds than before. Many buildings were now being built away from the street and thus, to draw the attention of motorists, building signs and detached signs located near the street were used.

#### D. Previous Building Alterations

Most commercial buildings have served many different purposes over the years. Since their original construction, they likely have been modified both internally and externally. Over time, historic buildings have been altered to accommodate technological improvements such as mechanical ventilation, heating and cooling.

The facades of many historic commercial buildings throughout the United States were altered to reflect the changing styles seen in commercial advertising, goods and fashion. Owners of historic commercial buildings throughout Alabama “modernized” the facades of their buildings. “Slipcovers” of prefabricated metal and other materials were erected on historic building facades beginning in the 1950s. Metal, brick and concrete panels covered either the entire upper façade or the area above the storefront. In more elaborate modernizations, porcelain terra cotta and enamel and other high-quality finishes were used. By the 1980s building owners began removing slipcovers to

expose and repair the original facades. In the process of attaching the slipcovers, original façade details may have been damaged or removed though the original facades of most



The upper portion of many historic building facades were covered in an attempt to either modernize them or stabilize deteriorating façade elements.

buildings remain otherwise intact. Sometimes these modernizations were necessitated by deterioration of façade elements caused by inadequate maintenance.



During the 1950s historic downtown buildings received updated storefronts that were influenced by sleek, modern styles captivating America through television, movies, advertising and art.

Historic storefronts also were updated with varying degrees of quality. Structural glass, vitrolite, marble and other glossy materials were used to cover or entirely replace aging wood and masonry storefronts and create a sleeker, more fashionable appearance. Angles were incorporated into redesigned storefronts to create a more futuristic appearance that contrasted with the symmetry and order of traditional storefronts.

Before removing modern alterations and restoring a façade, building owners should inspect the façade to understand how the slipcover or storefront elements are attached to the original façade. It may be possible to remove portions of a slipcover to assess the condition of the underlying façade. Owners are encouraged to consult with a local architect or preservationist to gain a better understanding of

the practical nature of removing modern alterations and restoring the original façade.

Owners also should consider the value that a building may have accrued locally as a result of previous alterations. That is, a building may have existed in its modernized form as long as it did in its original form; and its value in the community may be directly connected with its modernized appearance. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation speak to this specifically:

**“Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.”**

Secretary for the Interior's  
Standards for Rehabilitation

## E. Alterations to Existing Buildings

When an existing building is occupied by a new tenant, adaptively reused or updated to meet modern standards and regulations, it is often necessary to make physical changes to the exterior or interior that can impact its historic features. These might include energy efficiency improvements, accessibility improvements, applying color, redesign or replacement of storefront features, and additions (see **Section 5-F, Additions** following).

### 1. *Protect character-defining elements*

When it is desirable or necessary to modify an existing building, effort should be taken to lessen the impact of the alteration on the overall design of the building and to protect original architectural features.

Transoms, awnings, skylights and other features were designed originally to contribute to ventilation, cooling and daylighting and may still be able to support modern mechanical and electrical systems in performing those roles.

Accessibility improvements, such as ramps, may not be necessary for many historic commercial buildings as their floors are often at the same level as the adjoining sidewalk. However, many civic buildings were raised above sidewalk level to emphasize their importance to the community and therefore may need accessible ramps. In such cases, it may be necessary to install ramps or lifts to meet access requirements. If access can be provided from a public rear or side entrance, this avoids changes to the appearance of the primary public view of the building. However, this should only be done when the front and side/rear building entrances are an equal distance from parking or from public entrances to the property. In any case, the addition of ramps should be inconspicuously integrated into the site and building entrance. For buildings with plazas or lawns, it may be possible to alter the grade (to 1:20 or less) at the front of the building to provide an accessible path without handrails. When a ramp and handrails are necessary,

handrails should be of a material and color consistent with comparable building details. Handrail design should generally be subtle and unobtrusive, not heavily ornamented to project a historic appearance. Dark-colored metal appears more transparent from a distance, and therefore less obtrusive, compared to other railing materials.



A graded path and ramp along the façade were added to improve accessibility while assuring sensitivity to the historic character of the building.

### 2. *Choose colors appropriate to the building and the district*

The earliest downtown buildings were typically the natural color of their exterior materials. Contrasting colors appeared in awnings and signs. During the 1920-1950 era, material choices expanded and so the color palette also increased. But through the 1950s exterior building colors were predominately natural or subdued. The use of bolder colors increased with Modern architectural styles, particularly when structural glass, metal panels and similarly glossy materials were used.

When making improvements to a building that alter original colors, the relative brightness, earthiness or subdued qualities of the original color scheme should be respected. As much as possible, the natural colors of exterior materials, if previously unaltered, should be retained. Historic photos if available can be helpful in determining original colors if the color scheme was previously altered. In any case, newly applied colors should be chosen with consideration given to the palette of colors used within surrounding buildings as well.

Previously unpainted brick should not be painted. Not only does this obscure the original appearance of the building, it requires the building to be painted again and again as the paint finish deteriorates over time. Painting brick and mortar also makes visual inspection of mortar much more difficult, hiding problems that may grow more severe over time.



In addition to changing the character of a historic building, painting brick hides mortar problems and requires repainting over time as the paint finish deteriorates.

Exterior surfaces must be prepared prior to painting or repainting. Refer to manufacturer's product and application instructions.

Awnings and signage allow greater color flexibility. These elements have historically been used to attract attention and thus have used more vibrant colors. But even these brighter colors were historically selected with the color scheme of the building in mind so that awnings and signs simultaneously complement and contrast with the building façade.

## F. Additions

Additions to existing historic buildings can significantly alter the design and appearance of the original buildings. Additions should only be constructed when the additional space needed cannot be provided by altering non-character-defining, interior spaces. But when it is necessary to build a new addition, the following practices should be observed:

### 1. *Protect features of the existing building*

Building additions should be designed to avoid or minimize damage, loss or obscuring of character-defining features on the existing building. The side and rear elevations of most historic commercial buildings contained few character-defining details and are generally appropriate locations to consider additions. Downtown buildings often extended to their side lot lines. Side elevations were typically designed as party walls, allowing buildings on abutting lots to extend to the outer face of the party wall. So these side elevations rarely contained

windows, doors or architectural details. In some cases, rear elevations may have been designed in this way as well.

While many downtown buildings extended to rear lot lines, others did not. In these cases, there may be room to construct an addition. Rear façades were generally only minimally designed since they were not visible to the public. These elevations will tend to have few if any character-defining details.

### 2. *Distinguish old and new*

New additions should be designed to complement the original building but not to mimic it or appear as if the addition were original. This requires a careful balance between harmonizing with the design of the original building and designing an addition to be "of its own time."

Additions complement historic buildings by using similar materials and by incorporating the rhythms, proportions and expression lines of the original building into the design of the addition. It is not necessary or recommended to integrate historic trim, window or door details into the façade of new additions. Design motifs from the original building may be used in an addition though designers should not be literal in the use of historic details.



The continuity of horizontal expression lines, arch motif and other details of the addition (left) to this downtown historic building (right) create design consistency. Yet, subtle differences allow the new structure to be distinct and contemporary.

Additions should not be flush with the original façade, as if the original façade has simply been extended. Since it may be important to maintain the building line along the sidewalk, additions can be placed as close to the sidewalk as the original building provided there is a recessed “connector” between the original building and addition.

### ***3. Design additions to be subordinate***

Additions should never overwhelm the appearance of the original buildings. This can be avoided by:

- setting the addition back from the front façade of the original building; although this may not be ideal when trying to maintain the building line along the street
- lessening the apparent size of the addition by aligning its “bulk” perpendicular to the

street/public view; upper floors of multi-story additions can be set back while the ground level façade maintains the building line along the street

- using fewer or less elaborate architectural embellishment than on the original building
- setting additional stories toward the rear of the original building to minimize their impact on the appearance of the original facade



The stair tower addition on the left is set back and features minimal detail so that the historic façade remains dominant.

## 6 Building Maintenance

Building maintenance is essential to protect financial investments in buildings, to assure their continued use and minimize long-term repair costs. Water is the predominate cause in the deterioration of building materials. Other potential causes of building deterioration are salts, acids, excessive heat as well as cold, settlement, abrasion, vegetation and animals and other pests.

The structure of a building must be kept in good condition to ensure safety. Load-bearing walls, columns, beams, joists and trusses must be maintained in good condition for the building to be structurally stable. Settlement and moisture penetration are the greatest dangers to the structures of historic buildings.

Many different types of materials are used in the design of downtown buildings, each with different life spans and susceptibility to deterioration. Different building materials call for different methods of repair and cleaning. See [Appendix, Tools and Resources](#) for sources of technical information.

### A. Repairs

#### 1. Conduct repairs as soon as possible

Costs to repair building deterioration increase over time—sometimes dramatically, when damage to building structures or systems are left unaddressed.

#### 2. Repair character-defining features with like materials and design

Over the lifespan of a building it is inevitable that its features may deteriorate or become damaged. There are many informational resources provided by the National Park Service and other organizations that can be used to guide historic building repair and rehabilitation efforts. In accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, deteriorated features should be *repaired* or *replaced* with like materials and design when repair is not possible. *Repair* includes patching, piecing-in, splicing and similar measures and can also include limited replacement of significantly deteriorated or missing *parts* of features. *Replacement*, in contrast, refers to the removal and substitution in kind of an entire feature, e.g., a door, window, column.

It is not always possible to find newly fabricated building features that match original features exactly. Nonetheless, it is important that the replacement features resemble the original ones in design, color, material and texture. Windows, for example, should have the same sash dimensions and lite pattern so that they are consistent not only with the design of the

building but they appear the same as other remaining original windows.



Many historic downtown buildings include details that cannot easily be replaced. It is sometimes necessary to use substitute materials that resemble the original ones.

### B. Maintenance and Cleaning

#### 1. Perform regular visual inspections

Many, but not all, building issues manifest themselves visually. So, it is important for the owner or staff to be watchful so that issues can be addressed soon after they are observed. Visual inspections may uncover cracks in masonry bearing walls or columns; sagging in beams or joists; water spots on ceilings or walls that indicate leaks; efflorescence (white, chalky residue) that indicates moisture in masonry; loose or damaged mortar, stones or brick; wood rot and corrosion on any visible steel structural members.

## 2. Protect the building from water and moisture

Roofs, windows, doors, skylights and flashing must be properly maintained to keep water out of the building structure. Gutters and downspouts must direct water away from the building. Roofs and flashing should be inspected regularly to assure that water flows off the roof and into gutters and downspouts and that there are no leaks. Ponding on flat roofs and lost or damaged shingles on pitched roofs should be addressed promptly. Cracks in masonry allow moisture into the structure and cause spalling, or flaking of the surface of masonry units.

Building occupants may come into contact with mold during normal business activities or maintenance. Mold is generally caused by dampness or excessive moisture in walls, ceiling tiles and other interior materials. Exposure can cause allergic reactions and breathing problems, particularly for those with asthma and other respiratory illnesses. Water leaks and high relative humidity are possible causes of mold growth that should be addressed quickly.



Building materials should be dried and cleaned as soon as possible after becoming wet due to leaks or flooding. A solution of water and either detergent or bleach can be used on hard surfaces. When mold grows in insulation, wallboard or carpet, the materials should be removed and replaced.

## 3. Use gentle cleaning methods appropriate to the building materials

Cleaning is an important part of building maintenance; and different materials require different cleaning methods. Inappropriate cleaning methods can harm or accelerate deterioration of certain materials. And, not all exterior materials require the same level or frequency of cleaning.

Exterior cleaning methods fall within three main categories: abrasive, chemical and thermal. The gentlest means of cleaning is dry brushing with a soft, natural-bristle brush. Using water and a soft brush or using a non-sudsing detergent with water are the next most effective methods.

- a. **Abrasive cleaning** methods include sweeping, dry scrubbing, sanding, scraping and particle blasting with such things as sand, walnut shells, glass beads and baking soda. Sandblasting should **NOT** be used to clean wood, sheet metal, and masonry. Particle blasting can damage exterior materials and opens pores in wood and masonry that allow moisture penetration. Pressure washing can also damage building materials and should be avoided. Carefully executed abrasive cleaning may be appropriate for strong materials such as cast iron.



Pressure washing and particle blasting can damage or cause deterioration in wood and masonry.

- b. **Chemical cleaning** methods include detergents, acids, alkalis, turpentine and

similar products. Removal of stubborn soils and paint may require stronger chemical cleaning products. In all cases, chemical cleaning products should be selected with regard to the specific building material being cleaned and the substance to be removed.



Cleaning methods should be tested on a mock-up or inconspicuous area of the building.

- c. **Thermal cleaning** methods, using heat plates or heat guns, can be used to remove paint. Thermal cleaning can scorch or burn some building materials. Open flames should not be used to clean historic surfaces. There are also cold thermal cleaning methods that work well in removing paint from metals.

Generally, masonry materials do not require cleaning. However, cleaning may be necessary to remove heavy soiling or to halt deterioration.

It is recommended that cleaning methods be tested on a small, inconspicuous portion of the exterior first. The test area should be examined

after a period of time to determine if the particular cleaning method will damage the material to be cleaned or inappropriately alter its appearance.

Some cleaning activities are necessary for the long-term preservation of building materials though they can remove a patina that is desirable with certain materials. Deciding whether to clean building materials will depend on the perceived impact the cleaning process will have on a building, as well as aesthetic choices regarding the patina of the materials.

#### ***4. Use caution with hazardous building materials***

When cleaning, repairing or performing other building maintenance tasks, it is possible to come in contact with building materials that pose health concerns. These include asbestos, lead paint and Polychlorinated Biphenyl (PCBs) among others. Caution should be exercised when such materials are uncovered and all applicable regulations should be followed. Removal of these materials may require special procedures, equipment and training.

## 7 Graphics



The following section addresses use of graphics for the downtown overall through a downtown organization and/or local government. For guidance on signage for individual businesses or developments, refer to **Section 4-B, Building Signage**.

### A. Branding

Branding is more than selecting a logo or designing signs for downtown. Developing a downtown brand is about uncovering what makes downtown unique compared to other local business districts or downtowns—its competitive advantage—and marketing that consistently. Logos, taglines and other advertising materials are tools crafted to

communicate the brand to the community and beyond.

#### 1. Distinguish your downtown

What makes your downtown different or special compared to another shopping district in your community or from other downtowns in your region? For some downtowns it is a concentration of certain types of businesses. For others it may be about history, geography or the downtown experience. To be successful in branding, a downtown organization must have an objective understanding of what the downtown offers and how customers view it. Only then can a brand emerge that differentiates downtown in a way that is true to downtown and that will appeal to customers.

#### 2. Use a clear, focused brand

Brands cannot cater to all of downtown's strong suits without becoming watered down, muddy or ineffective. Competitive messaging must be focused around a singular idea to be memorable. Attempting to please every stakeholder will likely result in an ineffective brand.

#### 3. Use high-quality graphic design

Once a brand is defined, logos, taglines and other advertising materials must be designed to communicate it. A professional designer should be used to translate the brand into graphic and written forms that can be used online, in print and in other media. These materials are an important investment in the future. They will be

used extensively and over a period of many years, so it is important to get it *just* right.

Logos must be legible. Because a logo will be used in a variety of formats, a clear font should be selected. This assures that it can be easily and quickly read, particularly from a distance as in the case of signage.

In addition to a logo, a professional designer can also provide a graphics package that allows the downtown brand to be incorporated into many different formats.



### B. Signage

Downtown organizations and local governments use signs in a number of ways to promote downtown—gateway signs, directional signs and identification signs. The colors, font(s) and graphics associated with the downtown logo should be incorporated into community signage wherever appropriate.

The more ways a downtown logo can be used, the more recognizable it becomes. In addition to more obvious uses such as print and online media, downtown logos also can be incorporated into:

- Wayfinding signs
- Street signs and banners
- Benches, kiosks and trash receptacles
- Billboards
- Shopping bags, coffee mugs
- Stickers and t-shirts

**1. Develop a wayfinding system**

Wayfinding signage helps visitors locate downtown and then to find a variety of destinations, including parking facilities, parks, historic or special districts and major public buildings. The relative complexity of routes leading into downtown from community gateways, the size of the downtown and the number and location of downtown destinations all contribute to how simple or elaborate a wayfinding system must be.

Once visitors have entered downtown, directional signs are located near specific intersections, or decision points, for the traveler. To maximize legibility for drivers, destinations are listed in a standard font and font size and only a limited number of destinations can be included. A sign with too many destinations listed takes drivers too long to read, interfering with traffic safety and reducing the overall

effectiveness of each sign. Pedestrian kiosks, however, can include a map and information on many destinations.



Main Street Mobile and local partners developed and implemented a downtown wayfinding and graphics master plan to help visitors find parking and important destinations.

**2. Choose gateway locations carefully**

If downtown gateway signs are to be installed—separately from city gateways—the surroundings should be considered. Gateway signs should be sited where the streetscape and the appearance of private development contribute to the positive image that is to be portrayed. Gateway signs are often in the form of monument signs much like community gateways. However, it also is possible for

gateway signs to be placed over the street. This may be advantageous when a monument sign would be impractical or inappropriate.



A wayfinding system has been developed for Downtown Huntsville that will include monument signs at gateway locations.

**3. Use consistent graphics**

Wayfinding signs should be consistently designed, incorporating the same colors, fonts and graphics that appear in the downtown logo. This shows the outside world that your community cares about its image and supports that image consistently and professionally. Consistent sign graphics also help the viewer recognize the signs more easily, distinguishing them from regulatory signs and business signs.



The wayfinding sign family prepared for Decatur includes consistent use of the city logo and colors.

**4. Use branding graphics throughout downtown**

Banners attached to ornamental light fixtures or similarly decorative poles support wayfinding and offer an inexpensive way to distribute the branding throughout the downtown. Large downtowns that have multiple, unique districts can unite the downtown with a similar banner design that uses changing symbols or colors to represent the distinct districts.



Banners are used for wayfinding and branding. They can also be changed out to promote special events.

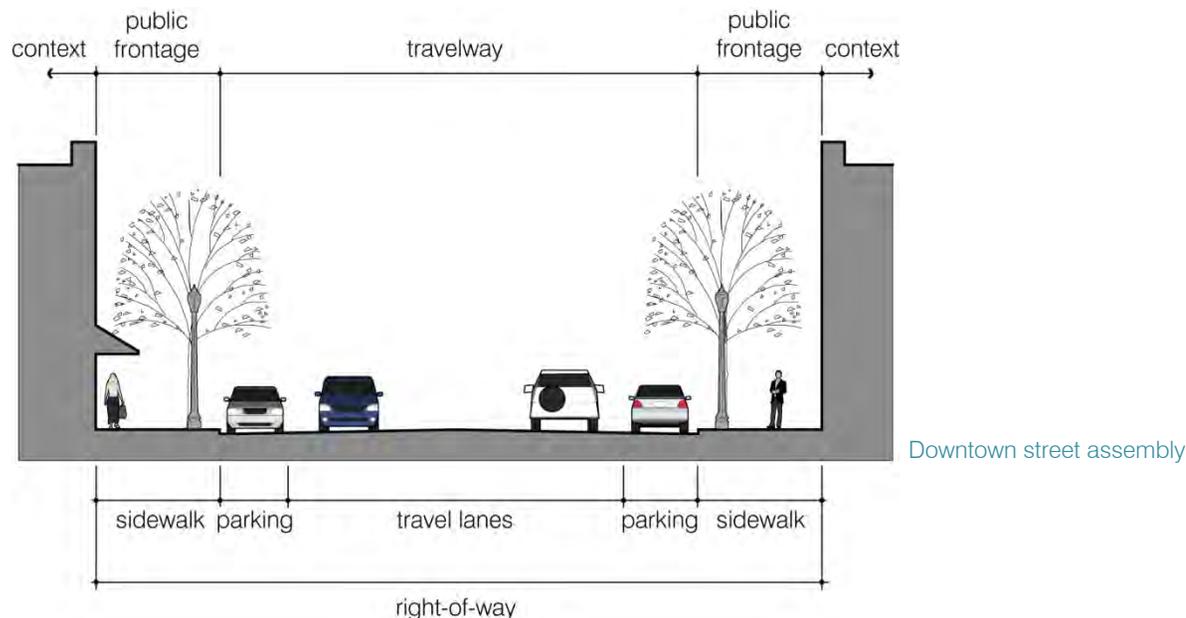
## 8 Public Space and Art

The following section describes how well-designed public space supports both civic and economic activities in downtown. Public space includes streets, parks, plazas and public parking areas.

Streets make up the largest percentage of public space in downtowns. This is one of many reasons that the design of streets is essential to the success of downtown business districts. In addition to accommodating vehicular traffic, streets also provide space for parking, walking, bicycling, window shopping, sidewalk dining and social interaction. They also are often used by communities for parades, marathons, festivals and other civic events. The recommendations that follow can be helpful to downtown organizations in partnering with local and state governments on streetscape improvement projects. These best practices also address the ways in which private property and business activities interact with the streetscape.

### A. Street Assembly

The function and image of streets are the result of three components: the travelway, public frontage and context. The *travelway* is contained within the public right-of-way. It is the portion of



the street between the curb lines—travel lanes, on-street parking, medians, and, in some cases, bicycle lanes. The *public frontage* is the remainder of the public right-of-way and includes landscaping, sidewalks, lighting and street furniture. *Context* refers to the private property, buildings and uses of property that line the street.

#### 1. Design streets for all users

Downtown streets serve more users than motorists and accommodate more functions than vehicular travel. This understanding is the basis of Complete Streets policies adopted by the US Department of Transportation and many state and local governments.

Reinvestments in downtown streets should optimize conditions for pedestrians (and bicyclists, where feasible and appropriate to the community) while also addressing motorist needs. This can include widened sidewalks, pedestrian lighting, shade trees or consolidating driveways.

Sidewalks of adequate width are necessary for the comfort and safety of pedestrians. Five (5) feet is considered the minimum width to allow people to pass one another comfortably. But because downtown sidewalks serve more functions than foot traffic, other elements also must be considered in determining the width of sidewalks. See **Public Frontage**, which follows.

Bicycles are normally accommodated in the travelway in a dedicated bike lane or in a

*sharrow*, a lane shared with vehicles and marked to indicate bicycle use. Outside the travelway, bicycles can be accommodated in a dedicated path separated from pedestrian space.



Sharrows are travel lanes marked to indicate that the roadway is shared by motor vehicles and bicycles.

Crosswalks should be clearly marked and include curb ramps that comply with the design requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Curb extensions, or bulbouts, at intersections reduce crossing distance for pedestrians. At intersections with large, busy roads this can be an important safety feature. Crosswalks can incorporate special paving materials or even artwork to enliven the streetscape.



Curb extensions at corners create more pedestrian space and shorten crosswalk distance.

## 2. Keep travel lanes narrow

Travel lane width is a primary factor in the width of the travelway and therefore the generosity or skimpiness of the public frontage. Wide travel lanes encourage travel speeds and turning movements that are inappropriate downtown. However, travel lanes that are only as wide as necessary calm traffic and help maintain a safe, walkable downtown environment.

Generally, travel lanes should be around ten (10) or eleven (11) feet in width. Additional width may be necessary on roads with heavy truck traffic. But on local streets with light traffic, lanes can be as narrow as nine (9) feet. For streets with more than two lanes, inside lanes may be nine (9) or ten (10) feet and the outside lanes slightly wider.

Due to cost limitations, it may not be possible within a streetscape project to move the curb line to narrow the travelway and create more space for landscaping and sidewalks. In such

cases it may be possible to re-stripe overly wide travel lanes to add a turn lane, bike lanes, or off-street parking.

For streets with parking lanes, the travelway can be narrowed at intersections using bulbouts. Bulbouts extend from the curb line across what otherwise would be the parking lane toward the outside travel lane. They help calm traffic and narrow crossing distance for pedestrians.

## 3. Optimize on-street parking

On-street parking is an irreplaceable asset that should be protected, especially adjacent to downtown shopping and dining activities. It is an efficient way to provide public parking convenient to downtown businesses. It also provides a buffer between moving vehicles and pedestrians.



Angled, on-street parking is preferable when the street is wide enough to accommodate it. Otherwise, parallel parking can be used, which requires less street width.

New driveways should be located and designed to minimize the loss of on-street parking spaces.

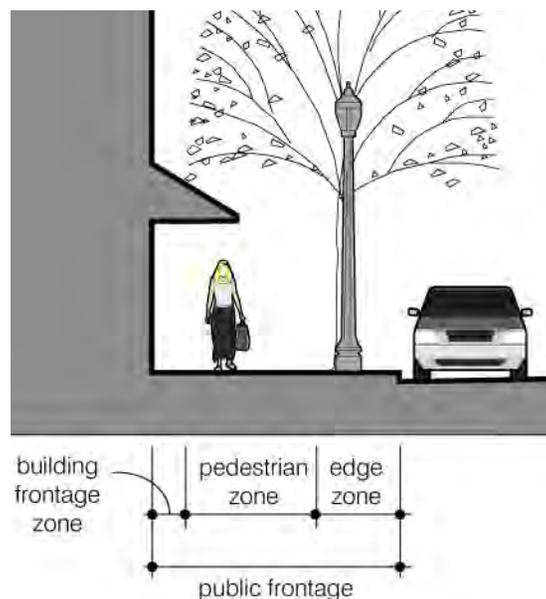
Many Alabama downtowns have state or US highways running through them. The Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) does not allow on-street parking on roads under its control. Once parking lanes are removed as part of a street widening or other improvement project on an ALDOT-controlled road, they are lost forever.

## B. Public Frontage

The public frontage is the non-vehicular portion of the streetscape and includes the *edge zone*, *pedestrian zone* and *building frontage zone*. The edge zone lies nearest the travelway and accommodates landscaping, light, traffic and utility poles, fire hydrants, seating, trash receptacles and similar furnishings. The pedestrian zone is the clear width maintained exclusively for walking. The building frontage zone is an area along the front of buildings that buffers pedestrians from window shoppers, building appurtenances and doorways. It is also used for private landscaping, outdoor dining, and merchandise displays.

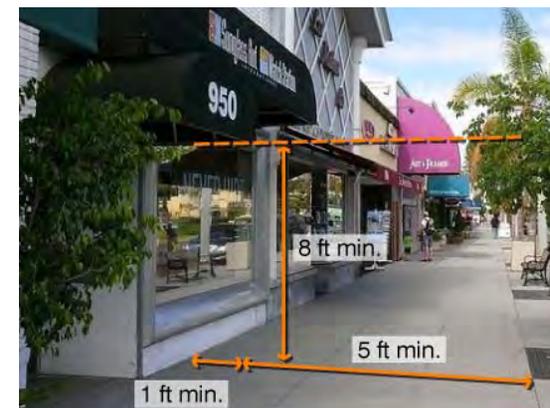
### 1. Keep sidewalks wide and unobstructed

To accommodate pedestrian travel and the many functions served by the zones described above, the public frontage must be relatively wide. Preferably, the public frontage should be fifteen (15) feet or wider, which allows for landscaping and furnishings in the edge zone, a comfortable thoroughway in the pedestrian zone, and a “shy” distance along building fronts.



The public frontage is more than just a sidewalk. It also includes an area directly in front of buildings that can be used for small outdoor displays or dining and a buffer area along the curb that contains landscaping, seating, light poles and other furnishings.

When the existing sidewalk, from curb to buildings, is less than fifteen (15) feet, it may be difficult to accommodate all three zones adequately. It may be necessary to forego either a landscaped edge zone or café tables in the building frontage zone. In any case, the pedestrian zone should have an unobstructed width of at least five (5) feet, a vertical clearance of eight (8) feet and be buffered from building fronts by at least one foot.



Sidewalks should have a vertical clearance of 8 feet, horizontal clearance of at least 5 feet and a “shy distance” from buildings of at least one foot.

Ten (10) feet, measured from the back of curb to the building line, should be considered an absolute minimum for the overall public frontage. If this is not currently provided and it is not possible to widen the sidewalk by moving the curb line, new buildings should be set back so that a full public frontage can be accommodated. The sidewalk would extend to new building fronts and can be placed in an easement.

Special pavers, colors, aggregate mixes and finish textures can be used to enhance concrete sidewalks. In all cases, sidewalk materials should be slip resistant.

### 2. Include landscaping for shade and color

Trees, shrubs and other landscaping soften the downtown environment by adding shade and color. During Alabama summers, street trees provide much needed shade. Normally,

landscaping is provided in the edge zone between the sidewalk and travelway. Bulbouts at intersections offer additional space for landscaping, although it must be located and sized to avoid obstruction of motorists' vision.

The edge zone includes either regularly spaced *tree wells* or a continuous *planting strip*. Along streets with parking lanes, tree wells are used and between them the sidewalk extends to the curb. This assures a suitable surface for access to parked cars. Foot traffic wears down grass and other ground cover in areas with high parking turnover so planting strips should only be used where there is no parking lane or parking turnover is relatively low.



Continuous planting strips are most appropriate along streets without on-street parking or low parking turnover.

During hot, sunny days built-up areas with a large percentage of roads, buildings and other impervious surfaces can experience temperatures up to 10°F hotter than less built-up areas. This is called the “urban heat island effect.” Not only can this make being outside uncomfortably hot, it increases energy costs to cool buildings. In addition to making downtown more beautiful, trees and landscaping can actually help control summer temperatures.

Street trees should be selected based on height characteristics, root spread and other factors. Street trees, at maturity, should have a clear height—from the ground to the bottom of the canopy—that does not obscure views of building signs and entrances. Shorter tree species should be selected when there are overhead utility lines along the street. Trees should be spaced regularly along the street, though adjustments may be necessary to account for driveways and alleys and to optimize storefront visibility. A 50-foot average spacing is typical. A horticulturalist, landscape architect or similar expert should be consulted when selecting tree species for streetscape projects.

Landscaping in the edge zone is also an important buffer from the travelway. People feel safer walking along downtown sidewalks that are separated from traffic by trees, shrubs, flower beds and other streetscape elements.

Planting strips and tree wells need at least four (4) feet of width to accommodate tree growth. Without trees planting strips may be somewhat narrower. When the public frontage is too narrow for a planting strip or tree wells, it may be possible to incorporate landscaping in corner bulbouts and in hanging baskets attached to light poles and similar fixtures.



Benches, bicycle racks, trash receptacles and similar items should be located in the “edge zone”

### 3. Provide street furnishings in busy areas

Along streets, furnishings are typically located in the edge zone. Light poles and similar furnishings must be set back from the curb to allow room for the door swing of parked cars. Street trees must also be set back, which also allows space for root growth. Trash receptacles should be located adjacent to intersections. Benches located in the edge zone face away from the street unless there is adequate width to orient them perpendicularly to the street. If the edge zone is narrow, it may be desirable to locate benches, bike racks and other furnishings in the building frontage zone. Similar

furnishings also should be provided in downtown parks, plazas and other open spaces.

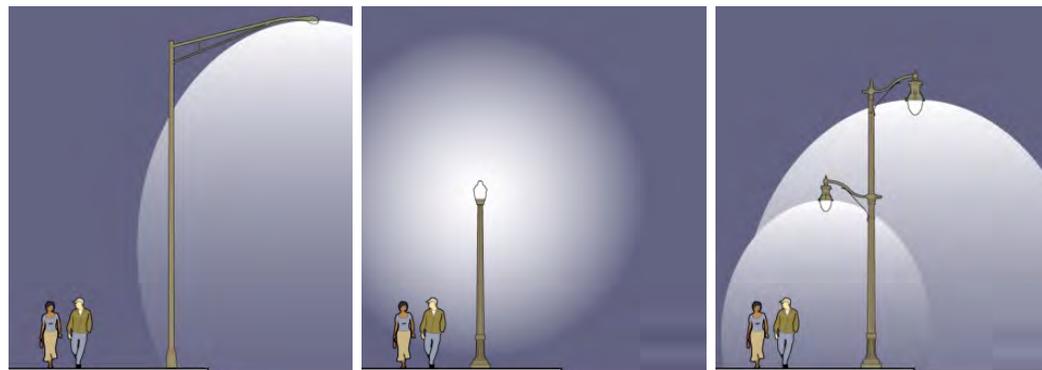
The design, materials and colors of benches, bike racks, decorative light poles, trash receptacles and other furnishings should be compatible with one another. In large downtowns with distinct districts, it may be appropriate to vary furnishing styles to emphasize unique characteristics of each such area.

### C. Lighting

For downtown businesses to successfully extend hours into the evening and for downtown to be an attractive location for lofts and other residential uses, quality lighting must be provided and properly distributed along sidewalks and in public spaces. Lighting not only makes downtown *feel* safer but can actually deter crime.

#### 1. Light sidewalks

It is not enough to depend on *standard* street lights to light downtown sidewalks. Street lights are generally located above and are directed toward the travelway primarily to improve visibility for drivers. Tall, high-powered street lights cast light onto sidewalks but resulting light levels can be uneven and the quality and color of lighting poor. Sidewalks should be lit with lower, more closely spaced lights. Some types of street lights can be used to light both the travelway and sidewalk effectively; otherwise, pedestrian light fixtures and poles can be used.



Standard “cobra” type street lights (left) are used to illuminate the street, not downtown sidewalks. Pedestrian light fixtures (middle) can be added on streets with standard street lights. Combination fixtures (right) replace standard street lights and illuminate the street and sidewalk.

Pedestrian light poles are located in the edge zone along with street lights but their fixtures are directed toward the sidewalk. Combination street lights include a taller fixture directed to the travelway and a lower fixture directed to the sidewalk. Pedestrian and combination street-pedestrian fixtures are typically mounted to decorative poles of metal or concrete.

#### 2. Avoid glare and light trespass

Light fixtures should be selected and placed to avoid glare and light trespass and provide even lighting levels. Cut off or full cut off fixtures direct light only to those areas intended to be lighted. Exterior lights, whether freestanding or building-mounted, should not cause light trespass on residential properties or cause glare along sidewalks or streets, which can impair the vision of pedestrians and motorists. Shielded light fixtures prevent these issues.

#### 3. Use high CRI lamps

Outdoor lighting should be “white light” with a high Color Rendering Index (CRI). Natural outdoor light has a CRI of 100, the top of the scale. Sodium vapor lights, both high and low pressure, have been commonly used for street and parking lot lighting for decades. Though they are energy efficient, they have a very low CRI, generally 25 or below. Studies have shown that driving safety is improved on streets with higher CRI lights. Law enforcement agencies prefer high CRI lights for street lighting and other exterior uses because sodium vapor and other low CRI lights make it difficult to differentiate colors of objects that are illuminated.

#### 4. Provide even lighting levels

Along streets, parking lots and open spaces, lighting types and locations should be selected

to provide even distribution of lighting. When light fixtures are placed too far apart, dark patches occur between them, which can cause pedestrians to feel less safe.

It is possible to achieve even light distribution with tall, high-powered lights, but they tend to cause light trespass on adjacent properties and night sky light pollution. Generally, a larger number of lower height (under 30 feet) fixtures will provide even light distribution in open spaces and parking lots while avoiding light trespass.



Downtown Demopolis features a beautiful, historic square created in 1819.

#### D. Open Space

Parks, plazas and squares are people magnets. Well-designed public open spaces attract downtown workers, shoppers and visitors at lunch hour, on weekends and during special events. They offer opportunities for people to gather, eat, play, people-watch or just enjoy time outdoors—all while being steps away from

all that downtown has to offer. Those who enjoy downtown open spaces are likely to shop or dine at nearby businesses and vice-versa, so there is a mutually beneficial relationship between downtown shopping and dining and public open space.

Most downtowns were planned with some type of public open space, but for those without, open spaces can be created in the form of pocket parks or plazas.

##### 1. Transform a vacant lot into a pocket park

Pocket parks are typically created using vacant lots, often ones where a building once stood. They vary in size but usually are small and can be quite narrow. Pocket parks should be created in central areas that are already busy or that are planned for private investments that will soon be generating foot traffic. Otherwise, these small parks may go unused and can become havens for unwanted activity.



Pocket park in Downtown Guin

Because converting a vacant lot into a park is cheaper than constructing a new building, there is a tendency to overuse this strategy to deal with the blight of vacant lots. This can take

potentially valuable real estate out of action and overburden the local government or downtown organization with ongoing maintenance of multiple spaces. An oversupply can also dilute interest in and the potential success of any one park.

##### 2. Encourage private construction of open space

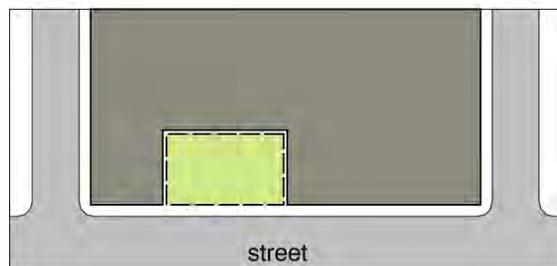
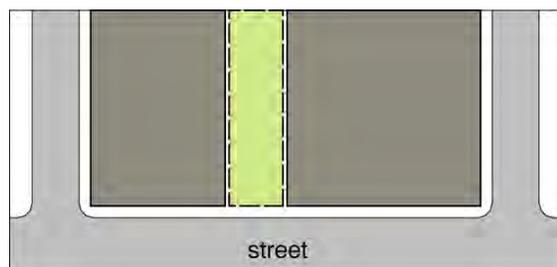
A plaza is a publicly-accessible open space located on the site of a privately-owned building. For downtowns without a public park or square, they can be a desirable alternative. Plazas can be privately-maintained; or a downtown organization can maintain the space through agreement with the building owner. Ideally, they are located at sidewalk level (rather than being elevated or sunken) and have some central element, such as a sculpture, clock tower, or water feature, that attracts attention and visitors.

Private open space can also come in the form of courtyards. Courtyards are surrounded on three sides by a building(s). They may be completely private or made accessible to the public. Surrounding buildings should have windows that look into the space. This allows building occupants to enjoy views of the space and to monitor activity there.

##### 3. Make open spaces visible

For safety reasons, it is important that public open spaces are visible from the street and are well-lit at night. Unwanted activities, whether it is vandalism or more serious criminal activity, tend to occur in locations that are not in public view.

To the degree practical, open spaces should have their longest dimension parallel to the street so that the furthest corners of the space are visible from the street and sidewalk.



Public parks normally should have their longest dimension along the street as shown in the lower diagram. Deep, narrow spaces (upper diagram) require greater supervision to deter inappropriate activity.

## E. Public Art

Public art adds to the character and image of downtowns. It is used to highlight and enliven public spaces. Sculpture and murals are the most common types of public art in downtowns. Otherwise mundane furnishings—benches, trash cans, bike racks, etc.—can also be designed artistically to enhance streetscapes and public spaces.

### 1. Use art to spice up downtown

Sculpture, primarily in the form of memorial statues, has been used in many Alabama downtowns to mark special locations and commemorate special events. Because sculpture is three-dimensional, it is normally located in a square, park, plaza or similar open space. It can also be placed in the streetscape. Sculpture does not have to be related to the history of the community to be appropriate downtown; it can simply be art for art's sake.

Murals have become popular in many Alabama communities as a way to enhance the downtown image. Like sculpture, murals may portray the history of the community. Historic signs painted on building walls can also be revived to serve an artistic function much like murals.



Dothan's Murals of the Wiregrass tour includes 16 murals, including "Tribute to Sherman Rose and the Tuskegee Airmen."

Murals can be used to make blank building walls in prominent locations more appealing. Side elevations of downtown buildings rarely included windows because they were covered

by adjacent buildings. Demolition of an adjacent building can leave such an unadorned wall exposed to public view.

It is important to exempt murals from local sign regulations so that murals do not conflict with the amount of signage that buildings are allowed under local regulations. Because of the legal difficulty in distinguishing murals from signs, communities have begun establishing mural or public art easement programs to resolve this. In these programs, easements are held by the local government. Public art that is accepted through easement programs are approved by a local arts council or similar organization.

### 2. Dress up vacant storefronts

Vacant storefronts can contribute to downtown blight, regardless of how well kept the buildings are. Downtown organizations and building owners in a few Alabama communities have used art to relieve the negative stigma attached to vacancy. Typically art is set up in merchandising displays. For nighttime impact, art displays should be lighted.



Local artist unveils art displayed in empty East Lake storefront.

A similar approach can be applied to storefronts that have been boarded up. With the owner's permission, a downtown organization can invite local artists to create temporary, weatherproof murals that are affixed to the boards covering the storefront. Some communities have also used interactive art installations in the same way, providing chalk, markers or other materials to let passersby add their own artistic creations or ideas to a temporary surface attached to a vacant storefront.

### 3. Partner with local artists and arts organizations

Local artists and arts organizations can be a great help in planning and incorporating art into downtown's open spaces. Local artists can be commissioned to produce sculptures or murals or for creating custom designs for street furnishings. Downtown organizations can also partner with local arts groups to hold art shows (both inside and outside) and pop-up projects.

## F. Public Parking

Public parking areas, especially when they front streets, are part of downtown's public spaces and impact its image. They should be designed and maintained to convey a positive image of the downtown. Public parking lots, particularly large ones, should be located a block or so away from the heart of downtown, as suggested in Section 2.



Frontage landscaping helps define the streetscape where there are gaps between buildings. Frontage landscaping can include plants, walls, fencing or a combination of these.

### 1. Line parking lots with landscaping

Parking lots are, in essence, storage areas and contribute little visually to the downtown environment unless thoughtfully designed. The most important design element to integrate parking lots into downtown is *frontage landscaping*. Frontage landscaping provides a vertical edge to the parking lot that helps maintain the building line along the street, which in turn maintains the pedestrian scale of the streetscape.

Frontage landscaping typically includes a planting bed along the sidewalk. The planting bed should include a hedge, or continuous line of shrubs, at a minimum. Evergreen shrubs are recommended. Flowers may be included for color and detail.

### 2. Direct motorists to public parking

Signage helps downtown visitors find public parking more easily. On-site signs let visitors know when parking lots are available for public use. Directional signage is placed in strategic locations to assist those unfamiliar with downtown to find public parking facilities. Signs should be placed at intersections where motorists must turn off major streets to get to public parking areas. Additional signs may be needed along secondary streets if additional turns are necessary.



Use well-placed directional signs to guide visitors to public parking.

### 3. Landscape and light surface lots

Public parking areas are used by a wide variety of people—downtown workers, customers from

around town and visitors from outside the community. It is important that these spaces reflect a positive image of the downtown. Landscaping and lighting contribute to this. Lighting is particularly important when parking areas are used at night and when they are too large to be adequately illuminated by lights along adjacent streets. Refer also to **Section 3, New Construction** for more information on parking, lighting and landscaping.

### G. Maintenance

Just as with buildings, maintenance of public space is important to the well-being of downtown. Whether it is dead plants, broken light fixtures or litter, a poorly maintained streetscape or park space hurts downtown's image. In some cases a lack of maintenance can become a safety issue. Loose pavers along the sidewalk can be a safety problem and liability for the local government.

#### 1. *Keep public spaces regularly maintained*

When public spaces go unmaintained for long periods of time, they lose their value to the community. People who once frequented them may come to avoid them altogether. This can lead to increased litter, vandalism and eventually more serious problems. On the other hand, frequent maintenance reflects community pride and a positive image for downtown, which attracts people and business activity.

Graffiti should be removed as soon as possible from public spaces. The appearance of graffiti, particularly if it is left unaddressed, signals to

passersby that an area is not tended to often and may be unsafe at times. Swift, diligent removal of graffiti sends the message to vandals that their efforts are in vain, that someone cares for the space and they may get caught the next time.



Remove or paint over graffiti diligently to deter vandalism.

#### 2. *Design for easy maintenance*

When streetscape improvements or public spaces are constructed, the design and materials selection should take into account long-term maintenance. Durable materials and low-maintenance plants should be preferred.

Drought tolerant trees and plants should be used as much as possible. Select trees with minimal fruiting and seeding. Landscaping beds should be designed so that they do not trap debris and litter.

Tree selection must take into account the available width of the planting strip or tree well adjacent to sidewalks so that roots do not damage the sidewalk over time. When a

streetscape is being renovated, the planting area for trees may need to be widened if certain species are preferred.

## 9 Demolition



Preservation is an essential component of downtown revitalization. The reuse of buildings not only protects community heritage, it often can be the most economical and environmentally-friendly solution to downtown investment. Historic commercial buildings were designed and constructed for a much longer lifespan than most new buildings. And, they are simple shells adaptable to many uses.

The budget of a new construction project tends to be split 50-50 between labor and materials. Preservation, on the other hand, is more labor-intensive. That difference is important for the local economy. Put simply, renovation projects use fewer materials purchased out-of-town and proportionately more local labor.

"I typically visit 100 downtowns a year of every size, in every part of the country. But I cannot identify a single example of a sustained success story in downtown revitalization where historic preservation wasn't a key component of that strategy. Not a one. Conversely, the examples of very expensive failures in downtown revitalization have nearly all had the destruction of historic buildings as a major element."

Donovan Rypkema  
Real Estate and Economic Development  
Consultant, PlaceEconomics

Yet, from time to time it may be necessary for existing buildings to be partially or wholly demolished. This could happen for a number of reasons. Buildings may have become damaged by fire or natural disaster. Inadequate maintenance can cause buildings to deteriorate to the point of structural failure. Perhaps a new development is planned that will be built on the site but requires removal of an existing building. Whatever the case may be demolition of buildings—historic and otherwise—and what happens next on the site need to be carefully evaluated by the building owner and downtown stakeholders.

Demolition of buildings in locally-designated historic districts falls under the purview of established guidelines and a formal review process. But outside of these districts, the following considerations may be helpful in

having productive discussions within the community on the potential demolition of existing buildings.

### A. Evaluating Demolition

#### 1. Retain historic buildings that support downtown's urban form

The greatest priority should be placed on saving buildings that enrich downtown's historic architectural fabric and that conform to downtown's intended urban form. In cases where a building is severely deteriorated or the owner is financially unable to stabilize or renovate the building, assistance of the local government, downtown organization and/or a preservation group may be necessary to save a locally-valued building.



The Selma-Dallas County historic Preservation Society was able to stabilize and save the long-neglected YMCA Building on Broad Street.

When a building owner proposes demolition of an otherwise sound historic building, those in favor of preserving the building should request from the owner time to develop alternatives that

would preserve the building and allow its continued use or reuse without posing a financial burden to the owner.

Buildings in historic districts are categorized as “contributing” or “non-contributing.” Contributing buildings are those that have architectural qualities that contribute to the overall historic character of the district. Noncontributing buildings are either historic buildings that have been significantly altered (to the point of having little of their historic architectural character) or are buildings from a later era without historic architectural characteristics

At the other end of the spectrum, non-historic buildings that do not conform to downtown’s intended urban form—for example, they are set back from the street—should receive the least scrutiny when proposed for demolition. If demolished a new building may be constructed that better conforms to the urban pattern of downtown.

Between these extremes are non-historic buildings that otherwise conform to downtown’s urban pattern. While these buildings could be architecturally altered to better complement downtown, their demolition may not be a cultural loss. The decision of whether or not to demolish the building comes down to an objective comparison of the cost of demolition and new construction versus the cost to alter the building to suit a new use.

### Demolition Review Criteria

The following are questions that can be used to guide decision-making on potential demolition projects:

- Does the structure pose an immediate and substantial threat to public safety?
- Is demolition necessary to allow new development which is of greater significance to the stability, revitalization and/or preservation of the district than the retention of the structure or portion thereof?
- Can the structure or portion thereof be reasonably adapted to an appropriate, economically beneficial use?
- Can the site reasonably be adapted to any appropriate, economically beneficial use without demolition?

#### *2. Respect public safety needs*

When buildings are severely damaged by fire or natural disaster, they may pose an immediate threat to public safety. In such instances it is necessary to allow demolition despite architectural or historic importance. In such cases, it may be worthwhile to preserve documentation of the building prior to damage including any architectural drawings and photographs.

### B. Post Demolition

Before a building is demolished, the owner should have a plan for the site after demolition. When there are no subsequent plans for use of the property, the site should be cleared of debris, graded/filled as necessary for safety and planted with sod or other ground cover (excluding the foundation if remaining). In some cases it may be necessary to secure the sight from trespassing.

## 10 Codes and Regulations

Physical investments in downtown properties are subject to a variety of codes and regulations that range from local building and zoning regulations to the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The purpose of this section is to highlight and provide guidance on those regulations that can have a substantive impact on downtown development.

### A. Zoning

Local zoning regulations define the types of uses that are permitted through the zoning districts that are applied to the downtown area. Some downtowns may include multiple districts that allow a different set of uses in each. Zoning regulations also control density, building height and setbacks, and parking. Most Alabama communities also regulate signage through zoning ordinances.

When contemplating construction of a new building, modifying an existing building or changing the use within an existing building, the local zoning ordinance should be consulted early on. If there is any uncertainty about how the zoning rules may impact a project, the local zoning or building official should be contacted.

### 1. Evaluate zoning regulations

In some communities downtown may have the same zoning designation applied to it as other commercial areas. These zones are typically called “general business districts.” The standards in these districts often include setback and parking requirements that are inappropriate for downtown yet perfectly suitable for auto-oriented commercial development *out on the highway*. As a result, additions to existing buildings and construction of new buildings downtown may require variances or special exceptions from the local zoning board of adjustments. In a few cases the zoning ordinance may allow a waiver from front setback requirements if adjacent buildings are built closer to the front lot line than normally required. But this does not solve side and rear setback and parking requirement conflicts.

Another common problem with downtown zoning is the prohibition of residential uses. Throughout the ages people have lived in downtowns. Historically, in larger cities in America a wide range of housing types were integrated into city centers. Even in Alabama’s small towns, residential uses occurred downtown—particularly in the form of merchants and their families living behind or above their stores.

With the adoption of local zoning laws in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, this practice became illegal in most communities. This was likely an unintended consequence of overly simplistic ordinances. But over the decades zoning

shaped the way communities grew, which then shaped the way we understood them. Eventually, communities came to believe that it was somehow inappropriate for housing to be permitted in downtowns.



Residential loft above ground floor retail in Cullman

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, communities began to realize that housing can play a pivotal role in the revitalization of declining downtowns. In those communities zoning laws began to change to once again permit *live-work buildings*, *upper-story residential* and other downtown housing types.

### 2. Customize zoning for downtown

Ideally, downtowns should have unique zoning classifications that allow buildings to extend to front and side lot lines. They should also be allowed to extend to rear lot lines where there are alleys.

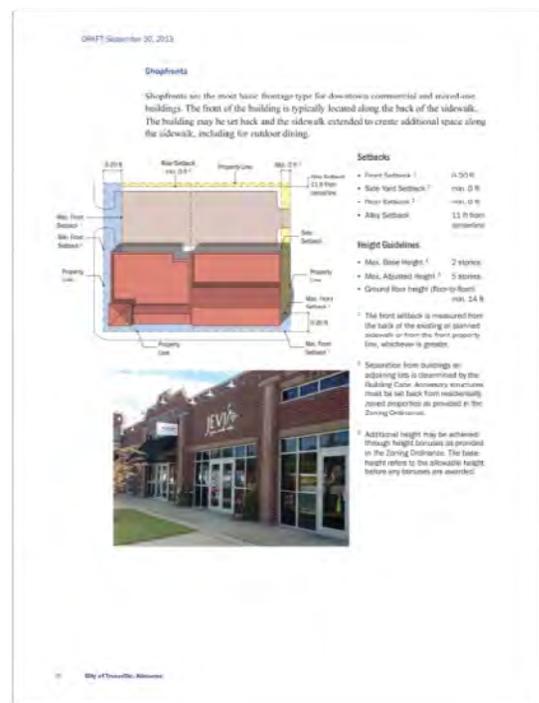
Parking requirements should be lower than in other districts to take into account the availability of public parking (in lots and on the street) as well as the likelihood that downtown visitors will walk from one place to another to accomplish their errands.

Sign regulations should be geared to building-mounted signs rather than freestanding ones. And, accommodations must be made for allowing downtown housing.

Downtown zoning districts should exclude heavy manufacturing or industrial uses. Smoke, odor, noise and other nuisances created by heavy industries were the primary reason the practice of zoning came about in the United States originally. If there are existing industries in the downtown area, they should have separate zoning classifications. It may be appropriate to allow limited custom fabrication and small scale repair and industrial uses that meet certain design and performance standards to assure compatibility with downtown's retail, service, office, housing and institutional uses.

Throughout the United States communities have begun adopting "form-based codes" for use in downtowns. These zoning codes place less emphasis on segregating uses and more emphasis on the way new development fits within and contributes to a walkable, downtown environment. While they have typically been adopted by larger cities, form-based zoning can also be appropriate for smaller communities. Form-based codes often use illustrations to help property owners and developers understand

design requirements. Communities should use an experienced zoning consultant, who can prepare a code appropriate to the technical capacity of the local zoning office and provide training to city staff as well as local real estate, development and design professionals.



Form-based zoning regulations place emphasis on getting the physical form of development right.

## B. Building and Life Safety Codes

In Alabama communities building and life safety codes are adopted and enforced by local governments.

Building codes regulate the manner in which buildings are designed and constructed to

assure safety. Local building codes are typically versions of the International Building Code or the Uniform Building Code adopted by the city or town council. Building codes often include electrical, plumbing and mechanical codes.

To enable enforcement of building code regulations, builders must apply for Building Permits. A Building Official or Inspector reviews building plans, issues permits and inspects projects during construction to assure they meet local codes.

A locally adopted Fire Code or Life Safety Code regulates development to reduce the likelihood, spread and damage caused by fires. A fire department official will typically review proposed building plans to assure compliance with these requirements as part of the Building Permit and inspections process.

### 1. Consult with Code Officials early

When planning a new building or an alteration to an existing one, it is important to consult with local code officials to understand what will be expected in obtaining a Building Permit. Compliance with building code requirements is often more complicated for older buildings, especially if they were constructed prior to the adoption of local building codes. It is essential to contact the local building official early on in the planning stages of an alteration project. Most codes give building officials discretion in evaluating and permitting changes to existing buildings.

## Common Building Code Issues in Older Buildings

- Egress
- Stairways and corridors
- Fire separation and partitions
- Outdated electrical systems
- Venting of plumbing and heating systems

### 2. Hire trained professionals

State law requires that most downtown construction projects will require the stamp of an Alabama registered architect. This includes any building over 2,500 square feet; duplexes, townhouses and multifamily dwellings; and places of assembly or educational occupancy.

Renovation and new construction projects may also require Alabama registered engineers or specially licensed contractors and subcontractors.

Use of a properly licensed and properly contracted design and construction team financially protects the owner in the event of structural failures and other building issues that result from inadequate design or construction.

### 3. Keep historic building documentation handy

The locally adopted building code may include specific allowances for historic buildings.

Documentation may need to be provided to the building official before waivers or modifications can be approved.

### 4. Adopt an Existing Buildings Code

Some communities have adopted an Existing Buildings Code. With historic buildings it can be costly and sometimes impractical to comply strictly with the building safety standards applied to new construction. An Existing Buildings Code provides more flexibility to achieve safety standards so that renovating existing buildings is not unduly discouraged.

## C. Hazardous Materials Abatement

During construction on older buildings, hazardous building materials may be exposed. Among these handling of asbestos and lead are subject to federal and local laws.

### 1. Use caution during maintenance and construction

When hazardous materials become airborne, they pose a health risk to workers and building occupants and can cause contamination beyond the building if precautions are not taken. Federal, state and local regulations apply to a variety of health hazards that may arise during construction.

Asbestos is a fire-retardant material used in insulation, floor tiles and other building materials up to the 1970s. Exposure to airborne asbestos fibers can cause lung cancer and asbestosis. Asbestos abatement requires special training,

equipment and procedures for removal and disposal that vary based on the friability of the material. However, not all asbestos materials are required to be removed. Some may be “encapsulated” to prevent future exposure.

Lead paint is another hazardous material once used in buildings. Like asbestos, lead becomes dangerous when it is airborne. This can happen when the paint is loose or flaking and when surfaces are damaged or disturbed during renovation work. When the paint is stable and the surface it is applied to will not be disturbed, it is generally not necessary to remove it and the surface can be painted over. In other cases, the paint or building material containing the lead-based paint may need to be partially or completely removed.

Other potentially hazardous materials that may be exposed during construction work on older buildings include: animal and bird feces, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), and radon.

### 2. Consult health and building officials about potential abatement needs

Asbestos, lead paint and other hazardous materials require proper disposal per local, state and federal guidelines. Testing may be required prior to abatement of certain materials. If you are planning construction work on an older building, contact your county health department for information about protecting the people and environment from exposure to hazardous materials.

## Tools and Resources

### A. Funding and Financing

There are a wide variety of national, state and local funding opportunities available for Alabama's main street organizations. Below represents many, but not all of the organizations that provide grants and other financial assistance for public and private planning, design and investment.

#### **Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs**

[www.adeca.alabama.gov](http://www.adeca.alabama.gov)

Offers Community Development Block Grants for a number of planning, recreation and infrastructure purposes.

#### **Alabama Historical Commission**

[www.preserveala.org](http://www.preserveala.org)

Offers operating and capital enhancement grants for preservation activities. AHC administers the state Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit program for residential and commercial properties.

#### **Alabama Humanities Foundation**

[www.ahf.net](http://www.ahf.net)

Awards grants for public humanities projects involving public participation.

#### **Alabama Power Foundation**

[www.alabamapower.com/foundation](http://www.alabamapower.com/foundation)

Offers grants in 1) Improving Education, 2) Strengthening Communities, 3) Promoting Arts and Culture and 4) Restoring and Enhancing the Environment.

#### **Alabama State Council on the Arts**

[www.arts.state.al.us](http://www.arts.state.al.us)

Offers grants to individuals and organizations for arts, planning and design activities.

#### **Community Foundations**

There are 13 community foundations with service areas throughout the state, each with varying capacities and missions.

#### **Daniel Foundation**

[danielfoundationofalabama.com](http://danielfoundationofalabama.com)

Offers grants to nonprofits for 1) Arts, Culture and Community Assets, 2) Community Needs, 3) Education and Youth and 4) Health.

#### **Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits**

[www.nps.gov/tps/tax-incentives.htm](http://www.nps.gov/tps/tax-incentives.htm)

Offers 10% and 20% tax credits for eligible historic rehabilitation projects. Program is administered by the National Park Service.

#### **Heart of the Community**

[www.pps.org/heart-of-the-community](http://www.pps.org/heart-of-the-community)

A public space design assistance grant offered annually through a partnership between Project for Public Spaces and Southwest Airlines.

#### **National Trust Preservation Funds**

[www.preservationnation.org/resources/find-funding](http://www.preservationnation.org/resources/find-funding)

Offers grants to nonprofits and public agencies for planning, education and other preservation activities.

#### **US Department of Transportation**

[www.dot.gov/livability/grants-programs](http://www.dot.gov/livability/grants-programs)

Offers "livability" grants for a variety of transportation projects that can be used to improve downtown mobility and accessibility.

#### **Additional Resources**

Information on additional public and private funding resources may be found at:

1. *The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.* [www.achp.gov/funding.html](http://www.achp.gov/funding.html)
2. *Alabama Association of Nonprofits.* [www.alabamanonprofits.org](http://www.alabamanonprofits.org)
3. *Alabama Giving.* [alabamagiving.org](http://alabamagiving.org)
4. *Alabama Planned Giving Council.* [www.alabamaplannedgiving.org](http://www.alabamaplannedgiving.org)
5. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy.* [philanthropy.com](http://philanthropy.com)
6. *The Council on Foundations.* [www.cof.org](http://www.cof.org)
7. *Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers.* [www.givingforum.org](http://www.givingforum.org)

8. *The Foundation Center.*  
[foundationcenter.org](http://foundationcenter.org)
9. *Grants.gov.* [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov)
10. *Southeastern Council of Foundations.*  
[www.secf.org](http://www.secf.org)
11. *Preservation Directory.*  
[www.preservationdirectory.com](http://www.preservationdirectory.com)

## B. History and Preservation Organizations

### **Advisory Council on Historic Preservation** [www.achp.gov](http://www.achp.gov)

The Advisory Council is an independent federal that promotes the preservation, enhancement, and productive use of our historic resources. ACHP advises the President and Congress on national historic preservation policy and works with other federal agencies to encourage stewardship of historic resources in federal projects.

### **Alabama Historical Commission** [www.preserveala.org](http://www.preserveala.org)

The Alabama Historical Commission is Alabama's state agency responsible for preservation and advocacy for the state's historic buildings and sites. The AHC administers Alabama's certified local government program; cemetery, historical marker and landmarks programs, and several other related preservation initiatives.

### **Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation** [www.alabamatrust.info](http://www.alabamatrust.info)

The Alabama Trust is a nonprofit organization with professional staff and volunteers, who work with the Alabama Historical Commission, organizations and individuals to promote preservation through a variety of activities throughout the state.

### **American Association for State and Local History** [www.aaslh.org](http://www.aaslh.org)

The AASLH provides leadership, services and support to encourage appreciation, preservation and interpretation of state and local history. The AASLH provides programs and services to assist history professionals and volunteers.

### **Appalachian Regional Commission** [www.arc.gov/grants](http://www.arc.gov/grants)

Awards grants to state and local governments, agencies and certain nonprofit organizations in 1) business development and entrepreneurship, 2) education and training, 3) health care, 4) physical infrastructure and 4) leadership development and civic capacity..

### **Association for Preservation Technology International (APT)** [www.apti.org](http://www.apti.org)

The APT is a cross-disciplinary organization dedicated to promoting technology in the conservation of historic structures and their settings.

### **Campbell Center for Historic Preservation Studies** [www.campbellcenter.org](http://www.campbellcenter.org)

Located in Illinois the Campbell Center offers training programs for individuals involved in the preservation of historic landscapes and cultural, historic, and artistic properties.

### **Docomomo International** [www.docomomo.com](http://www.docomomo.com)

Docomomo International is a private organization pursuing the documentation and conservation of buildings from the modern movement.

### **Heritage Preservation** [www.heritagepreservation.org](http://www.heritagepreservation.org)

Heritage Preservation is a private organization dedicated to preservation of the cultural, historic, and scientific heritage of the United States. Heritage Preservation provides assistance to museums, libraries, archives, organizations and individuals through programs and expert advice.

### **International Council of Monuments and Sites** [www.icomos.org](http://www.icomos.org)

The ICOMOS is an international non-governmental organization of professionals dedicated to the conservation of the world's historic monuments and sites through education and training, technical assistance, documentation, and advocacy.

### **National Alliance of Preservation Commissions**

[napcommissions.org](http://napcommissions.org)

The NAPC provides technical support to preservation commissions throughout the United States.

### **National Archives and Records Administration**

[www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)

The NARA is an independent federal agency responsible for the preservation of and access to important legal and historic documents of the federal government.

### **National Center for Preservation Technology and Training**

[www.ncptt.nps.gov](http://www.ncptt.nps.gov)

The NCPTT is a program of the National Park Service to advance the art, craft, and science of historic preservation in the fields of archaeology, historic architecture, historic landscapes, objects and materials conservation, and interpretation.

### **National Main Street Center, Inc.**

[www.preservationnation.org/main-street](http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street)

A subsidiary of the national Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Main Street Center is a national organization dedicated to historic preservation-based community revitalization. NMSC provides education, outreach, training, and online resources to assist its network members.

### **National Park Service**

[www.nps.gov/history](http://www.nps.gov/history)

Historic preservation programs of the National Park Service help communities protect and preserve the nation's historic resources. NPS administers the National Register of Historic Places, federal historic preservation tax incentives and many other federal programs that provide services, financial assistance, education, guidance, and technical information in support of historic preservation.

### **National Preservation Institute**

[www.npi.org](http://www.npi.org)

The NPI is a nonprofit organization offering education and professional training to public and private sector groups and individuals for the management, preservation and stewardship of historic and cultural resources.

### **National Trust for Historic Preservation**

[www.preservationnation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org)

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is a privately funded non-profit organization that provides leadership, education, and advocacy to save America's diverse historic places and revitalize our communities.

### **Partners for Sacred Places**

[www.sacredplaces.org](http://www.sacredplaces.org)

PSP is a national, nonsectarian, nonprofit organization devoted to helping congregations and their communities preserve, sustain and continue use of historic sacred places.

### **Recent Past Preservation Network**

[www.recentpast.org](http://www.recentpast.org)

The Recent Past Preservation Network is a nonprofit organization that promotes preservation and advocacy for “recent past” architecture—modern buildings that have achieved significance through exceptional design.

### **Society for American Archaeology**

[www.saa.org](http://www.saa.org)

SAA is the professional organization for archaeologists in the Americas. Their mission involves promotion of research, stewardship and education in support of understanding humanity's past through archaeological investigation.

### **The Society of Architectural Historians**

[www.sah.org](http://www.sah.org)

The Society promotes the study, interpretation and conservation of significant architecture, design, landscapes and urbanism worldwide.

### **Theatre Historical Society of America**

[www.historictheatres.org](http://www.historictheatres.org)

The Theatre Historical Society of America is dedicated to preserving the nation's historic theatres, including 19th century opera houses, early nickelodeons, vaudeville houses, small town and neighborhood theatres, ornate movie palaces, open-air theaters, drive-ins and early multiplexes.

### Vernacular Architecture Forum

[www.vernaculararchitectureforum.org](http://www.vernaculararchitectureforum.org)

The Vernacular Architecture Forum encourages the study and preservation of vernacular buildings and environments. Vernacular refers to design influenced primarily by local traditions, needs and materials rather than recognized styles.

## C. Planning and Design Organizations

### Alabama Communities of Excellence

[www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org](http://www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org)

ACE is a nonprofit organization promoting a comprehensive approach to assist Alabama towns (between 2,000 and 18,000 in population) in planning for and achieving community and economic development goals. ACE teams lead participating communities through a three-phase process focusing on assessment, leadership development and strategic planning, and implementation.

### Alabama State Council on the Arts

[www.arts.state.al.us](http://www.arts.state.al.us)

The Council is the state's official arts agency, promoting excellence in the arts, increasing public recognition and appreciation for the arts, and supporting economic vitality in Alabama communities through the arts. The Council offers annual grants to organizations and individuals for arts, planning and design activities.

### American Institute of Architects

[www.aia.org](http://www.aia.org)

AIA is the national professional organization for architects. In Alabama, AIA is represented through a [state council](#) and chapters serving [Birmingham](#), [Mobile](#), [Montgomery](#), Northeast and North Alabama.

### American Planning Association

[www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org)

The APA is the nation's professional organization for public and private sector planners, public officials, and citizens involved with urban and rural planning issues. APA is active in Alabama through a [state chapter](#).

### American Society of Landscape Architecture

[www.asla.org](http://www.asla.org)

The ASLA is the national professional association for landscape architects, who are often involved in the planning and design of streetscapes, public spaces and other downtown development projects. ASLA is represented in Alabama through a [state chapter](#).

### Auburn University College of Architecture, Design and Construction

[cadc.auburn.edu](http://cadc.auburn.edu)

Auburn University's College of Architecture Design and Construction offers degree programs in architecture, interior architecture, landscape architecture and community

planning. In addition to educational programs at the Auburn Campus, CADC operates two design programs with active outreach components: the [Rural Studio](#) in Newbern and the [Urban Studio](#) in Birmingham. The Small Town Design Initiative

### Citizens' Institute on Rural Design

[www.rural-design.org](http://www.rural-design.org)

CIRD is a nonprofit organization providing access to resources for communities with populations of 50,000 or less. CIRD evolved from the national Your Town partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the State University of New York.

### Congress for the New Urbanism

[www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org)

CNU is a nonprofit organization of real estate, planning and design professionals, public officials and citizen advocates promoting walkable, neighborhood-based development. CNU have partnered with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Environmental Protection Agency, the Institute of Transportation Engineers and Federal Highway Administration and other national partners to promote best practices in community planning and design.

### DesignAlabama

[www.designalabama.org](http://www.designalabama.org)

DesignAlabama is a nonprofit organization that promotes the importance of design in Alabama

communities. Each year DesignAlabama hosts the Mayor’s Design Summit, which partners planning and design experts with city leaders to help solve community development issues.

### **Project for Public Spaces**

[www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

PPS is a nonprofit planning, design and educational organization providing assistance to communities in “placemaking”. PPS provides technical assistance, online resources and training opportunities to help people strengthen communities by creating and sustaining vital public spaces.

### **Institute of Transportation Engineers**

[www.ite.org](http://www.ite.org)

ITE is an international educational and research association of transportation professionals committed to advancing best practices in multimodal transportation, mobility and transportation safety. ITE is represented in Alabama through a [state section](#).

### **Smart Growth America**

[www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org)

Smart Growth America is the lead organization in a national coalition of state and local partners working to promote “smart growth”. SGA offers technical assistance workshops to communities covering topics such as complete streets, smart growth zoning, walkability, and parking. A limited number of free workshops are awarded annually through a competitive process.

### **Urban Land Institute**

[uli.org](http://uli.org)

ULI is an international nonprofit organization of real estate development, planning and design professionals dedicated to creating better places through the exchange of best practices and experience. ULI conducts research, provides programs and authors publications to advance placemaking globally.

### **YourTown Alabama**

[www.yourtownalabama.org](http://www.yourtownalabama.org)

YourTown Alabama is a nonprofit organization that promotes the importance of planning and design in shaping the future of Alabama communities. YourTown hosts an annual workshop that introduces small town and rural technical assistance providers and decision makers to the role of design in community planning.

## **D. Online Resources**

### **Alabama Communities of Excellence**

[www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org](http://www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org)

The ACE Resource Library provides information on government agencies, nonprofits and consultants and links to educational information on a wide variety of community and economic development topics pertinent to small towns in Alabama.

### **Context Sensitive Solutions**

[contextsensitivesolutions.org](http://contextsensitivesolutions.org)

The USDOT’s Federal Highway Administration promotes best practices in the design of transportation facilities through this website. The site includes guidance on applying context-sensitive design principles and links to case studies, research, presentations and similar resources.

### **Downtown Research & Development Center**

[www.downtowndevelopment.com](http://www.downtowndevelopment.com)

The Downtown Research & Development Center is an online clearinghouse for information on revitalizing downtowns and main streets. The site includes links to articles, books, publications and similar materials.

### **National Main Street Center**

[www.preservationnation.org/main-street](http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street)

The National Trust’s Main Street Center provides a variety of resources related to the program’s Four Point Approach through its online Main Street Solution Center. The Solution Center is limited to members only.

### **Preservation Briefs**

[www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm](http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm)

Through its catalog of Preservation Briefs, the National Park Service provides detailed, essential guidance on preserving, rehabilitating and restoring historic buildings. The Preservation Briefs are categorized into over 40 topics ranging from awnings to graffiti removal.

**The Resource Guide for Rural Planning and Design**

[rural-design.org](http://rural-design.org)

The Citizens' Institute on Rural Design publication includes a list of organizations and funding sources pertinent to planning and design issues of downtown revitalization.

**Smart Growth America**

[www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org)

The Smart Growth America website includes a wide variety of information and links on planning and design issues including articles, research and guidebooks.

**USDA Rural Information Center**

[www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/downtown.html](http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/downtown.html)

The USDA's National Agricultural Library includes a repository on downtown revitalization informational resources. The webpage includes links to information on downtown revitalization planning and design, case studies, best practices and similar resources.

**Walkable Communities, Inc.**

[www.walkable.org/library](http://www.walkable.org/library)

The nonprofit Walkable Communities' online library is a clearinghouse of photos, videos, presentations, best practices, articles and other resources for improving walkability in communities, a cornerstone of downtown design.