



Principles and Standards for Design Guidelines in Pennsylvania Communities

Purpose of these Principles and Standards

Design guidelines are one of the tools that communities use to manage change to the built environment. In older and established communities, illustrated guidelines provide valuable guidance to property owners and decision-makers involved in the application of historic preservation ordinances, funding façade improvement programs, and providing advice on effective maintenance practices for older buildings. These Principles and Standards are intended to provide local governments, community organizations, and consultants with guidance on how to develop effective and useful design guidelines for older and historic communities in Pennsylvania.

Application of these Principles and Standards

The following principles and standards should be used by local governments, community organizations, consultants, and others to develop design guidelines for older and historic communities in Pennsylvania. These concepts are meant to apply to documents that are focused on districts and neighborhoods as well as on individual resources that may be scattered throughout a community.

These Principles and Standards will be applied by the PA SHPO in the following ways:

- **Certified Local Government (CLG) Program**
Municipalities that participate in the CLG program are required to adopt and apply illustrated design guidelines when reviewing applications for certificates of appropriateness and other permits/approvals for locally designated historic properties. Design guidelines developed and adopted by CLGs, as well as all design guideline projects funded through the CLG grant program, must meet these Principles and Standards.
- **Keystone Historic Preservation Grant Program**
Design guidelines developed with funding from the Keystone Historic Preservation Grant program must meet these Principles and Standards.

Other agencies and partners may reference these Standards and Principles for purposes of their programs. Examples may include Keystone Communities funding and Main Street Accreditation.

- **Keystone Communities Façade Improvement Grant Program**
Grantees seeking grant funding for façade improvement projects from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) should develop and implement design guidelines that meet these Principles and Standards. The adopted guidelines should be used to evaluate any work that proposes to use Keystone Communities funding.
- **Main Street Accreditation**
Communities seeking accreditation from Main Street America or the Pennsylvania Downtown Center should develop and implement design guidelines that meet these Principles and Standards. Guidelines may be used for advisory or regulatory purposes but should help to demonstrate the community's preservation ethic.

Definition of Design Guidelines

Design guidelines are written recommendations, approaches, and/or policies about repairs, improvements, and alterations to existing buildings, additions, new construction, site work, and other changes to the physical environment in a defined location. Guidelines typically include photographs, drawings, and other graphics to illustrate the architectural features, concepts and approaches described in the text.

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Principles

1. Design Guidelines reflect a community's shared design ethic, management philosophy, and desired future conditions.
2. Design Guidelines are developed through a public process that involves residents, property owners, community stakeholders, and other interested parties.
3. Design Guidelines are educational in nature and help stakeholders understand their community's history and built environment.
4. Design Guidelines encourage stewardship and sensitive treatment of a community's identity and character.
5. Design Guidelines help decision-makers reach consistent and defensible decisions about design issues and proposed changes to individual properties and the broader community.
6. Design Guidelines are reviewed regularly and updated as necessary.

Standards

1. Design Guidelines should be specific to the type of community and built environment they are intended to address.
2. Design Guidelines should address the full scope of activities, projects, and issues that may be relevant to properties in the community.
3. Design Guidelines should be clear and concise, use specific, non-technical language, and be organized in a logical manner that is user-friendly and easy to reference.
4. Design Guidelines should avoid language that is rigid or prescriptive and allow for adaptation and design solutions that are responsive to and consistent with the community's design ethic.
5. Design Guidelines should use a combination of text, photographs, and illustrations to effectively convey information.
6. Design Guidelines should help property owners understand what actions, activities, and choices are consistent with the community's design ethic and management philosophy.
7. Design Guidelines should be attentive and responsive to building and zoning codes and other relevant policies.
8. Design Guidelines should be based upon commonly accepted preservation best practices, including the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

Understanding the Purpose and Intent of Design Guidelines

Guidelines are different than regulations, ordinances, or zoning codes because they do not dictate specific requirements or solutions. Instead, guidelines are intended to provide guidance on how to evaluate options and make informed decisions about a variety of design issues, including materials and construction methods. A design guideline (e.g., “duplicate the dimensions, texture, finishes, installation methods, and where possible materials, of existing clapboard siding when repairing or replacing deteriorated material”) falls between a general standard (e.g., “Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved”) and a specification for implementing it (e.g., “clapboard siding must be made of mahogany, ½”, thick, 4” wide with 1” overlap between courses”). A design guideline is intended to help users understand how to implement a standard in a manner appropriate to the building, without prescribing a singular approach or solution for all projects.

Contrast this approach to zoning ordinances, which are implemented through regulatory codes that provide uniform requirements that all properties must adhere to. This type of black-and-white approach to managing changes to historic places typically does not work well because the goals are different and there may be a variety of ways to meet those goals. There is a need for different approaches because no two buildings in any community, despite similar age, use, design, or materials, have evolved in exactly the same ways over time. One may have experienced a change of use or been significantly altered. The other may retain more historic fabric but has deteriorated more than the first. The materials and approaches necessary to preserve character-defining features on these two buildings are different and require a degree of discretion and flexibility appropriate to the property in question. Amplify this situation across the dozens, or perhaps hundreds of buildings of varying ages and styles in most historic communities, and the challenges of developing prescriptive regulations for evaluating design and material choices become apparent.

The Different Users and Uses of Design Guidelines

Design guidelines serve different purposes in different communities, sometimes being used in multiple ways simultaneously. Guidelines are also used by different user groups in a given community, and each may have distinct needs or expectations about the structure, format, and phrasing of the document. When developing guidelines, it is important to understand the various ways that a community anticipates using the document as well as the demographics of the community, as these things will likely affect how the document should be organized, written, or illustrated.

Common uses for design guidelines:

- **Advisory** – In some communities, guidelines are used as a resource to help influence or convince property owners to make certain choices, but are not related to specific permitting, funding, or enforcement processes. In these situations, the guidelines contain best practices and articulate design concepts as a way of expressing a community’s goals. Property owners and design professionals are encouraged to consult these guidelines when determining how to approach a project but are not required to do so.
- **Funding** – Some communities offer funding for the repair or rehabilitation of historic properties or for new construction. Façade grant programs, in which local governments or non-profit organizations provide funding to support commercial storefront renovations or improvements (and occasionally residential facade or porch projects) are a common example of this type of program. Guidelines are used to determine whether the funded project is appropriate for the building or district and is consistent with the community’s design philosophy.

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- **Permitting and Regulation** – Communities with historic preservation ordinances for local historic districts or individual landmarks require property owners to receive approval before making changes to existing buildings or constructing new ones within those designated areas. These proposals are typically reviewed by a panel of volunteer experts who have been appointed by the local government, and this panel then makes recommendations to the governing body. Design guidelines may also be used by planning commissions and zoning officials in the review of projects under zoning codes or other land development policies. In these situations, design guidelines are used to help property owners understand the requirements they are expected to meet in order to gain approval for their project. Decision-makers, including staff, advisory boards, and elected bodies use these guidelines to decide whether a proposed project is appropriate and should be approved.

User Groups: The following groups are among the most common users of design guidelines.

- **Property Owners** – property owners may use design guidelines to help them understand their building and its history, select appropriate materials, or make design decisions. Owners may seek information for their own education, because they need approvals or permits, or as a condition of funding.
- **Contractors** – trades contractors and other skilled professionals may use design guidelines to prepare estimates, scopes of work, or bid documents for clients, to increase their knowledge about historic buildings, to prepare for the design review process, or to comply with approval or permit requirements.
- **Design Professionals** – architects, engineers, and other design professionals may use design guidelines to help their clients comply with approvals or permits, secure funding, or to conform to the community’s design philosophy.
- **Real Estate Agents** – real estate professionals may use design guidelines to help their clients understand the programs, expectations, and requirements of owning an older or historic property.
- **Code Officials** – municipal staff who are responsible for reviewing projects and applying building and zoning codes may use design guidelines to evaluate whether project plans meet the necessary requirements for approval.
- **Historic Architectural Review Boards/Historical Commissions** – review boards and commissions that review projects under local historic preservation ordinances may use design guidelines to determine whether a project should be recommended for approval.
- **Planning Commissions** – planning agencies may use design guidelines to implement design-oriented aspects of zoning, subdivision, or other land use codes. Examples include zoning overlay zones, form-based zoning codes, conservation zoning, and traditional neighborhood developments.
- **Elected officials** – Governing bodies who may be required to approve projects under historic preservation or zoning ordinances may use design guidelines to determine if a project meets the requirements of the ordinance.
- **Community development/Main Street organizations** – organizations that manage commercial districts and other community development initiatives may use design guidelines to evaluate projects for grant funding or to advise property/business owners on appropriate design treatments with the goal of improving and enhancing the neighborhood’s appearance and character.