

Town of Acton Design Review Guidelines

PURPOSE

The purpose of these guidelines are to:

- Promote attractive and appropriately scaled development
- Preserve the existing New England character of the Town
- Facilitate a circulation system that safely integrates multiple forms of transportation-vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians
- Protect and increase property values by improving the Town's overall appearance
- Adhere to the objectives of the Town and individual Village Master Plans

Acton's character is defined by its three 19th century village centers and its rural New England roots. Successful future development should respect this special past by implementing contextually sensitive site planning principles combined with building designs promoting appropriate scale, massing and materials. Acton has three historic village centers, as well as rural and commercial areas that each possess a unique visual context. The following guidelines outline site and building components for successful development throughout the town.

The intent of the Design Review Board is not to prescribe what styles of architecture it would like to see in any area of Acton. Applicants are expected to be creative with architectural styles and materials and it is anticipated that new construction will blend with existing scales and styles. At Design Review Board meetings, new ideas and concepts are often generated. The Board will work within an applicant's needs to achieve results beneficial to both the applicant and the Town.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

Site History and Context

Individual developments should understand their context and placement within the adjacent neighborhood or Village. Awareness and knowledge of the site's historical and environmental background is important and should be taken into consideration before commencing design activities.

Sustainable Principles

Developments promoting sustainable principles of both site and building design embodied in LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), the Massachusetts Stretch Code, Energy Star and other programs are strongly encouraged.

Building Placement on Site

Correct placement of the building(s) on the site is fundamental to a successfully designed project. New structures should present their main entrance(s) to the public street and be located no further from the front lot line than adjacent structures on either side of the proposed location-creating a unified and consistent alignment of building facades that help define and address the street edge. Locating the building closer to the street will preserve more open space and also permit space behind it for parking and service access. Buildings should be located to promote safe vehicular and pedestrian access. Clear-cutting the site of mature trees to accommodate the building location is strongly discouraged.

Public Spaces

Development should strive to create appealing public spaces and provide pedestrian access and connections to existing public amenities via sidewalks, covered walkways, and lawns. Provide public amenities that invite public use such as benches, water features, and shaded gathering spaces.

Parking

Where possible, locate parking behind the structure to allow the building to be in closer to the street. This is important for encouraging greater density along the street, creating a more appealing pedestrian environment, and for minimizing the impact of service access for deliveries and trash removal. In all cases screen parking with landscape buffers. Developments are encouraged to minimize the number of parking and/or share parking spaces with adjacent properties. Refer to the Zoning Bylaws.

Sidewalks

Well designed walkways are critical to creating a pedestrian friendly experience. Where building setbacks permit, separate sidewalks from the street with a landscaped buffer. Buildings entrances, parking areas, and important public spaces should be directly served by sidewalks. Attractive paving materials such as pavers in lieu of asphalt or concrete are encouraged. Refer to Acton's Sidewalk Design Guidelines available on the Town website.

Landscaping

Thoughtfully designed landscaping appropriate to the context of a small New England town should include the careful use of stone walls, wood fencing, paving materials and plantings. These features can tie a structure to its landscape, define spaces and make for a pleasant pedestrian experience. Preserve mature plantings, stone walls and other historic features and minimize modifications to the natural topography of the site.

Plantings

Indigenous and sustainable plantings appropriate to the context should be

used and placed in a manner that appears natural and integrated into the landscape. Avoid State listed invasive plant materials. Plantings should be grouped to include a variety of types and scale from trees, shrubs, perennials and ground cover. Plantings should be used to define spaces, shade pedestrian spaces, soften buildings and to create buffers between public spaces and roads, parking areas and mechanical, electrical and telecommunications equipment.

Lighting

Acton has adopted a lighting bylaw that encourages energy conservation and eliminates extraneous light that can spill offsite or cause glare. Select pedestrian-scaled light fixtures appropriate to building type and location. Avoid the use of floodlighting, wall packs and tall light posts intended for lighting large areas. Refer to the lighting section of the Zoning Bylaws.

Building Massing and Scale

With the objective of maintaining a small town character buildings should appear to be modest, relating to the scale of the immediate context. Reduce the apparent scale of the building by introducing small-scaled architectural features, creating an irregular footprint and breaking the roofscape. Avoid long expanses of repetitive architectural elements, and flat unarticulated wall surfaces.

Existing Structures

Existing buildings and structures of historic value should be preserved and if renovated and expanded done so in a manner that is respectful of the character, features and details of the existing structure. Historic structures are valuable contributors to the Town's character and should be preserved in their original location if possible. Close collaboration with Acton's Historic Commission, Historic District Commission and other Town resources is encouraged.

Roofs

It is characteristic of traditional New England architecture and smaller scaled structures that roofs be sloped and articulated with dormers, chimneys, gables, cupolas, etc. Larger structures likewise can benefit from a similar treatment that will break-up the massing into appropriately scaled elements. Avoid large flat roofed areas or conceal them behind parapets or sections of sloped roof.

Windows and Doors

With the exception of retail storefronts, modestly scaled vertically proportioned windows articulated with muntins are most appropriate to the the local building vernacular. Building facades should have an abundance of windows and doors that use clear, nonreflective glass. Windows on higher floors should align vertically with windows below if possible. Building

entrances should be architecturally prominent, protected from the weather and address the street or primary pedestrian pathway.

Storefronts

Well designed storefronts add vitality to the streetscape encouraging business as well as pedestrian traffic. Retail storefronts should make generous use of glass, face the street or sidewalk and not be obstructed by piers or other features that block view of the display windows. Carefully designed awnings coupled with appropriately scaled signage and lighting will further enhance the storefront's appearance. To the extent possible, storefronts should be continuous, and uninterrupted to maximize its frontage on the public way.

Materials

There is a strong preference for authentic natural materials such as wood, brick, and stone for the exterior of structures and landscape features. Construct windows, storefronts and public doorways of wood where possible. Synthetic materials should be as close in appearance and detail to the natural material it simulates and should be used in locations not visible from the public way.

Mechanical, Electrical and Telecommunications Equipment

Conceal utilities and mechanical, electrical and telecommunications equipment such as transformers, meters, satellite dishes, etc. from public view. If possible utilities should be placed below grade, ventilation equipment enclosed within the building envelope or concealed by parapets, and service areas and dumpsters enclosed and located away from public view.

Signage

Building signage should be appropriately scaled to the building or surface onto which it is placed, should not obscure important architectural features and should be readable for both pedestrians and drivers approaching the site. In the Town's historic districts, signage approval is required by the Historic District Commission. Refer to Acton's comprehensive signage regulations within the Zoning Bylaws.

For further information contact:

The Design Review Board
drb@acton-ma.gov

Town Hall
472 Main Street
Acton, MA 01720