

# 1

Chapter 1

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## 1.1 Purpose

The residents of Denver seek to preserve and protect their historic landmarks and districts for future generations. This document provides property owners, design professionals, contractors, neighborhoods, and the Denver Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) with information and resources to guide future decision-making and promote good stewardship of our City’s architectural and cultural heritage.

The design guidelines strive to accommodate the needs of property owners to make modern improvements, while protecting the character-defining features of Denver’s historic landmarks and districts. They inform and assist property owners planning exterior alterations, new construction, or routine work to keep a historic structure in good repair.

Note that these design guidelines supersede a number of previous policy and guidelines documents as summarized in “Previous Guidelines & Policies” on page 12.

This document is provided to:

- **Assist in retaining Denver’s historically, culturally, and architecturally significant buildings.**
- **Maintain neighborhood character and stabilize property values.** See “Benefits of Preservation” sidebar for more information.
- **Assist property owners and their design professionals.** The design guidelines provide educational materials to ensure that valued properties are well maintained for use by future generations.
- **Guide design review.** The design guidelines outline the required design review process for applicants and serve as the basis for decisions by the Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) and, when applicable by the Lower Downtown Design Review Commission (LDDRC).



Left: The Delos Allen Chappell House individual landmark in the Wyman Historic District

## Benefits of Preservation

Historic preservation promotes three key elements of community sustainability:

- **Cultural and Social Sustainability.** Preserving historic places nurtures a sense of continuity and connection—linking residents to the stories, traditions, and craftsmanship that define Denver’s identity. These shared places foster belonging, support diverse narratives, and make the City a more livable and meaningful place for all who call it home.
- **Environmental Sustainability.** Maintaining and reusing historic buildings helps conserve the energy and resources originally used to construct them, while significantly reducing construction waste and material sent to landfills. Preservation also encourages walkable, compact neighborhoods, contributing to a more sustainable urban form. These areas often feature a connected street grid, minimal building setbacks, and close proximity to shops, schools, transit, and other everyday amenities—making it easier for people to walk, bike, or use public transportation. This type of development pattern reduces dependence on cars, lowers greenhouse gas emissions, and promotes healthier, more vibrant communities.
- **Economic Sustainability.** Historic preservation supports economic sustainability by favoring local jobs, skilled craftsmanship, and heritage tourism. Studies have shown that the protections offered by historic districts help stabilize—and often increase—property values. In many cases, historic designation can enhance a property’s long-term value and market appeal.

## 1.2 Policy & Regulatory Foundation

The design guidelines are intended to implement adopted City policies and work within established regulations.

Key policy and regulatory documents are summarized below. All documents are available for download at [www.denvergov.org](http://www.denvergov.org).

### Comprehensive Plan 2040

Comprehensive Plan 2040 establishes a 20-year vision for Denver as a city that is livable for its people, now and in the future. *The Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures and Districts* help implement a number of specific plan policies, including:

- “Preserve the authenticity of Denver’s neighborhoods and celebrate our history, architecture, and culture” (Goal 2.3).
- “Enhance Denver’s neighborhoods through high-quality urban design” (Goal 2.2).
- “Reduce the disposal of solid waste and conserve raw materials” (Goal 5.7).

### Blueprint Denver

The 2019 Blueprint Denver plan supplements Comprehensive Plan 2040 with more specific land use and transportation policies. *The Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures and Districts* support Blueprint Denver policies by helping shape growth and change while protecting Denver’s valued attributes and existing development patterns.

### Building & Fire Code

The Denver Building and Fire Code establishes the minimum, mandatory standards for building construction in Denver. Denver’s code is based on international standards for safe, habitable structures. All construction projects must meet the Denver’s code, although special exceptions may be available for historic properties.

### Denver Zoning Code

The Denver Zoning Code provides the fundamental siting, structure form, and use that apply to all properties throughout the City. Projects subject to design review must also meet standards for the applicable zoning district and building form, such as minimum setbacks and maximum height.

If conformance with zoning regulations would have an adverse impact on the historic character of a property, owners may apply for an administrative adjustment as delineated in Chapter 12 of the Denver Zoning Code.

Property owners are strongly encouraged to coordinate with zoning staff early in the design review process to ensure that projects meet all zoning standards prior to review by the Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC). See pages 9-10 for more information on the design review and approval process.

## Historic Background

The City of Denver was established in 1858 and quickly emerged as the major metropolitan City of the Rocky Mountain region capitalizing on the mineral wealth of the nearby mountains and widespread railroad connections to process and distribute products throughout the country. Denver is distinct in the Rocky Mountain West for several qualities:

- Brick and masonry construction of commercial and residential structures
- Streetcar commercial pockets, such as those found on South Pearl Street, South Gaylord Street, & Tennyson Street (north of 38th Ave.)
- Parks, parkways, and civic architecture dating from the City Beautiful Movement of the early 20th century
- Architecturally eclectic and culturally significant neighborhoods
- Concentrations of structures representing specific eras resulting from the City’s boom and bust cycles, including:
  - » Late 19th century (1858-1899) Lower Downtown, Larimer Square, Capitol Hill, Curtis Park, 9th Street, Baker, Whittier, Highland, West Highland, & other residential streetcar suburbs
  - » Early 20th century (1900-1930) Civic Center, Downtown, Country Club, East 7th Avenue, warehouses in Ballpark area, Park Hill, Berkeley, & Congress Park
  - » Mid 20th century (1945-1960) neighborhoods to the east and south of downtown such as Harvey Park, Hilltop, Wellshire, & Virginia Village

Sidebars included throughout this document offer added background information and context related to Denver and the design guidelines.

## Policy and Regulatory Foundation (continued)

### Landmark Preservation Ordinance

Adopted in 1967, the City of Denver's Landmark Preservation Ordinance (Chapter 30 of the Revised Municipal Code) provides the overall framework for historic preservation in Denver. The Ordinance:

- Establishes the powers and responsibilities of the Landmark Preservation Commission
- Establishes the criteria and process for designating historic structures and districts
- Requires LPC (or Landmark Preservation staff, as delegated by the LPC) review of specific projects involving historic properties - see page 10 for more information. Grants the LPC power to adopt design guidelines
- Incorporates the Secretary of the Interior's Standards - see page 8 for more information



Left: Buildings in the La Alma Lincoln Park Historic Cultural District. Right: The Potter Highlands Historic District.

## 1.3 Considering Historic Significance

A historic structure may be an individually designated Denver landmark structure or may be located within a historic district. Structures located within a historic district are considered to be contributing or non-contributing structures to the district.

To be designated, a structure or district must meet the designation requirements outlined in Landmark Preservation Ordinance. The structure or district must retain enough historic integrity to reflect its time and place in Denver's history. Additional considerations related to historic significance are summarized below.

- **Period of Significance.** In most cases, a property is considered significant because it represents or is associated with a particular period in history or an important community. Building materials and features dating from this period of significance typically help define the character of the structure. Historic districts also have a period of significance established as part of the designation process. This is typically the period when most of the structures were constructed or notable historic events occurred. Structures and additions built within the period of significance for a historic district are generally considered contributing as described under contributing structures and additions below. Structures and additions not built within the period of significance are generally considered to be non-contributing as described under non-contributing structures and additions below. Over time, each district has undergone many changes, including new structures and additions, which have become part of the district's story.
- **Denver Landmarks.** Properties designated as individual landmarks have stand-alone historic significance and protection under the Denver Landmark Preservation ordinance. An individual Denver landmark property can include one or more buildings, sites and features that have recognized architectural, historical, geographic, and/or cultural significance.
- **Contributing Structures and Additions.** Structures within a historic district are generally considered contributing if they were constructed during the period of significance and can be recognized as being from that period (meaning they retain historic integrity). Most historic district ordinances or subsequent clarifying ordinances include either a list of contributing structures or a period of significance for that district. If no such list is available, the LPC makes a determination during the design review process using the criteria outlined in the Landmark Preservation Ordinance. Original structures and later additions that were constructed within the period of significance are generally considered contributing structures or additions. Some structures may have been altered from their original appearance but are still considered contributing structures because they retain sufficient building features and form to convey their historic character and significance. Other structures may have major alterations that render them as non-contributing, or may have later additions that do not contribute to their historic significance and can be considered for removal or replacement.
- **Non-contributing Structures and Additions.** The classification of "non-contributing" applies to all vacant lots and structures or properties that do not contribute to the significance of a historic district. Some non-contributing structures are more recent construction that were not built during the period of significance, while other structures are older but have been so substantially altered that they no longer retain their historic integrity. In some cases, a contributing structure may have a later addition that is considered to be non-contributing. Non-contributing structures may be allowed greater flexibility, but they should remain architecturally compatible with the historic context. Projects involving a non-contributing structure are still subject to the design review process to ensure that changes are compatible with the character of the historic district.
  - » **Note: "Contributing" and "Non-contributing"** are terms defined in the Landmark Preservation Ordinance.

### National, State & Local Historic Designation

A property or district may be designated as historic through national, state, or local programs. However, only local designation—through Denver's local preservation ordinance—provides regulatory protection. National and state historic registers are primarily honorary, and do not prevent demolition, relocation, or alterations. The *Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures and Districts* apply exclusively to properties and districts designated under Denver's local preservation ordinance, which is the key tool for ensuring long-term protection, thoughtful stewardship, and the compatibility of changes over time.

## Considering Historic Significance (continued)

- **Historic Integrity.** Underlying these design review policies and guidelines is the concept of historic integrity. This simply means that a building or historic district can be recognized as belonging to its particular time and place in Denver's history. Elements of integrity may include the building's overall mass, form, materials, and architectural details (such as porches, brackets, dormers, windows, and doors) and the relationship of the building to its surroundings and landscape. Additionally, signs can be important elements for commercial and institutional buildings. Loss of historic integrity means that a building no longer reflects its historic time and place because so many changes have been made to the building. In making design review decisions, the LPC carefully evaluates the effect that proposed additions and other major alterations will have to assure that the building's or district's historic integrity is maintained. Approval is given to those projects that retain and enhance the characteristics that give a building its sense of time and place, or integrity.
- **Character-Defining Features.** When planning a preservation project in a historic district, it is important to carefully review the district's character-defining features, such as:
  - » District layout and composition - streets, land use, lot size, and setbacks
  - » Primary structures - mass and form, roofs, windows, and materials
  - » Landscape and streetscape - outbuildings, sidewalks, wall, fences, and lighting



Left: Baker Neighborhood Historic District. Right: Alamo Placita Historic District.

## 1.4 Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties

The City of Denver's Landmark Preservation Ordinance directs the LPC to adopt the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, while allowing the LPC to develop design guidelines that expand these basic rehabilitation principles to better apply to Denver. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation guide alterations to historic properties and are used for the review of historic preservation tax credits. The Standards for Rehabilitation, listed below, are most relevant to the design guidelines. To view all of the standards, visit the National Park Service's Technical Preservation Services webpage: [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)

1. A property shall be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.
2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property shall be avoided.
3. Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, shall not be undertaken.
4. Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.
5. Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.
6. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.
7. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used.
8. Archaeological resources shall be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.
10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.



Top: Molly Brown House after exterior restoration. Middle: Denver Dry Goods undergoing restoration Bottom: Window restoration and re-installation at Denver Academy.

## 1.5 Design Review

The Landmark Preservation Commission conducts design review for any exterior work on individual Denver landmarks or a property in a historic district that requires a building permit, a zoning permit, a curb cut permit, or an encroachment permit. Design review is intended to protect the historical, architectural, geographical, and cultural attributes that are recognized and valued through the designation process.

The design review considers the historic character and significance of properties as described in "Considering Historic Significance" on pages 6-7. The LPC uses these design guidelines to guide the design review process.

Design review is required for any exterior work on any individual Denver landmark site or at any property located within a historic district. This includes:

- Exterior work requiring a building and/or zoning permit. This includes window and door replacements, mechanical work, reroofing, and other alterations
- Additions
- Site work and hardscaping, such as fences, retaining walls, and pergolas
- New construction, including new accessory structures
- Signage
- Zone lot amendments
- Curb cut and encroachment permits
- Demolition of a Denver landmark structure or a structure within a historic district

### Potential Flexibility on a Facade that Is Not Visible

While alterations and additions to any façade must be considered on a project-by-project basis, alterations and additions may be granted more flexibility on a facade that is not visible from the street or from public vantage points. See "Public Vantage Points & Visibility" sidebar for more information.

Alterations and additions are most likely to be acceptable when they do not impact the form of the structure and do not involve removal of significant architectural materials or details. When considering the level of exterior change acceptable for a less visible wall on a historic structure, the primary factors to consider are:

- Impacts to the character-defining features of a structure, property, or district.
- Impacts to the preservation of a structure's overall form and mass.
- Visibility from public vantage points.
- Significance of the structure - refer to pages 6-7.

The following project types on façades that are not visible may be granted additional flexibility:

- Common window and door replacements or changes to window and door openings – Refer to 2.4 Treatment of Windows and Doors.
- New or altered porches, decks and balconies – Refer to 2.9 Treatment of Residential Buildings.
- Awnings and canopies – Refer to design guidelines 2.10.8-2.10.10
- Other building attachments and additions, such as a rear dormer – Refer to design guidelines 2.5.4.
- Alterations and additions to garages and secondary structures that are not readily visible from public vantage points – Refer to Chapter 3.
- Site changes, such as rear fences, pergolas, swimming pools, or patios - Refer to Chapter 5.

### Public Vantage Points & Visibility

A public vantage point is any public place from which a property or building can be viewed by a person of average height. Public vantage points include streets, sidewalks, and public parks. Public vantage points do not include private property, parking lots, vacant property, or an alley.

Visibility refers to a portion of a building or a site seen by a person of average height (5'-6") standing at grade at a public vantage point.

Primary facades and secondary street-fronting elevations have a high level of visibility from public vantage points. Side interior and rear elevations may or may not have visibility depending on public vantage points and site conditions. Vegetation and fencing are temporary and are not considered to reduce visibility.

Projects that are not visible from public vantage points may have greater flexibility.

## Design Review (continued)

### Administrative Review or Commission Review

There are two approval tracks for design review:

- **Administrative Review.** Smaller projects that meet the design guidelines may be administratively approved by Landmark Preservation staff.
- **Landmark Preservation Commission Review.** Projects meeting any of the following conditions, as determined by Landmark Preservation staff, must be reviewed by the LPC:
  1. All additions that add more than 900 sq. ft. or add more than 40% square footage to existing above-grade square footage.
  2. Projects that are readily visible from public vantage points, other than fencing and minor site work that meets the design guidelines, and readily visible projects at non-contributing buildings.
  3. All rooftop additions that are readily visible from public vantage points.
  4. All new construction of primary structures, tandem houses, and Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).
  5. Major changes to readily visible, character-defining doors, windows, porches, and other historic features.
  6. Major changes to historic materials.
  7. Comprehensive Sign Plans (CSPs).
  8. Demolition work that requires LPC review, as discussed on page 11. This includes demolition of contributing and non-contributing landmark structures and properties in historic districts. Note: Administrative (rather than LPC) review can apply to minor demolition work that meets these design guidelines.
  9. Zone lot amendments.
  10. Alterations or additions to City-owned landmarks or City-owned properties in historic districts, with the exception of work that would otherwise qualify as a Landmark Quick Review.
  11. Major alterations or additions to properties owned by Denver Public Schools that are individual landmarks or contributing buildings in historic districts.
  12. Projects determined by Landmark Preservation staff to not meet the design guidelines.

### Design Review Precedent

In the design review process, the LPC and Landmark Preservation staff consider the unique circumstances of each project. Therefore, the previous approval of a specific project in one setting and set of circumstances does not necessarily set a precedent for approval of future similar projects.

### Registered Neighborhood Organization (RNO) Review

For new construction of primary structures and tandem houses, Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), and pop-top additions, an advisory review meeting with an RNO may be required. Applicants will be referred by Landmark Preservation staff to the qualified advisory RNO following a pre-application meeting. The applicant shall meet with the RNO within 3 weeks of the referral, prior to formally submitting the application for LPC design review. Please contact Landmark Preservation staff for more information.



**Left:** New buildings under construction in the Curtis Park Historic District. **Right:** A modern rear addition in the Wyman Historic District

## 1.6 Demolition Review Process

The demolition review process applies when demolition is proposed for all or part of a structure which is an individual landmark or is located within a historic district. The LPC must approve the demolition of all primary structures in historic districts, even if they are non-contributing to the district. See pages 6-7 for more information on contributing and non-contributing structures.

All demolition approvals are conditional upon the approval of a replacement structure or site plan. This ensures that historic properties and historic districts retain their historic character and discourages vacant lots.

There are two approval tracks for demolition review:

- **Administrative Demolition Review.** Landmark Preservation staff may administratively review demolition applications for non-contributing accessory structures, and small non-contributing additions.
- **Landmark Preservation Commission Demolition Review.** Demolition of individual landmarks and primary structures in historic districts must be reviewed by the LPC. Demolition is defined in the Landmark Preservation Ordinance. The LPC will also review the demolition of accessory structures that are considered contributing to the historic district or individual landmark site.

Demolition of contributing or non-contributing additions may be eligible for administrative review or require Commission review depending upon the scope of the replacement plan.

### Demolition Public Hearing

Because demolition is a consequential decision the LPC may hold a public hearing for some demolitions described in the Landmark Preservation Ordinance. The LPC may also require a public hearing for demolition of a contributing accessory structure if the LPC finds the structure to have historic, architectural, geographical, or cultural significance of its own, and its removal would affect the historic integrity of the site.



**Left:** Demolition on Grant Street. **Right:** Demolition of the Cooper Building at 17th and Curtis Streets. Schott, Robert W., Cooper Building demolition. DPL Digital Collections, Call No. X-24929.

## 1.7 Application of the Guidelines

The design guidelines establish a clear framework for maintaining the historic character of Denver's landmark structures and districts, while allowing for compatible changes. They are intended to guide alterations, additions, and new construction in a way that respects historic significance, which is typically detailed in the original designation application or designating ordinance, while accommodating contemporary needs. The design guidelines focus on preserving the character defining features and architectural integrity of historic properties while allowing alterations that are compatible in design, materials, and scale. This approach ensures that the unique historical and cultural values embedded in the original designation are honored and maintained.

Exterior work that does not require building or zoning permits, and interior remodels are not subject to Landmark design review. Although the LPC and Landmark Preservation staff review some interior work if it is part of a tax credit project. Please consult with Landmark Preservation staff if you are unsure whether the design review process, or the use of these design guidelines, applies to your project.

### Additional Design Guidelines May Apply

In some cases, supplemental design guidelines were adopted by the LPC for specific historic districts. *The Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures and Districts* provide overall guidance regarding the treatment of historic structures in these historic districts. The district specific design guidelines provide further detail regarding the unique character-defining features within a specific historic district. A few individual landmarks also have supplemental design guidelines that were adopted by the LPC, such as Union Station and the Emily Griffith Opportunity School. Applicants are encouraged to consult Landmark Preservation staff to determine if additional design guidelines apply. Additional historic district guidelines include:

- *Country Club Gardens Historic District Design Guidelines*
- *Country Club Historic District Design Guidelines*
- *Denver's Civic Center Design Guidelines*
- *Denver's Union Station - Urban Design Standards and Guidelines*
- *Emily Griffith Opportunity School Design Standards and Guidelines*
- *Five Points Historic Cultural District Design Standards and Guidelines*
- *La Alma Lincoln Park Historic Cultural District Design Guidelines (English and Spanish)*
- *Lower Downtown Historic District Design Guidelines*
- *Lower Downtown Historic Urban Edge District 4 Design Guidelines*
- *Lower Downtown Streetscape Design Guidelines*

### Previous Design Guidelines and Policies

This document supersedes the following guidelines and policies previously adopted by the LPC:

- *Design Guidelines for Landmark Structures and Districts (1995)*
- *Design Guidelines for Landmark Lighting (1997)*
- *Contemporary Guidelines for Landmark Structures and Districts (2006)*
- *Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures and Districts (2014, revised 2016, revised 2022)*

## Application of the Guidelines (continued)

### Design Guideline Chapters

This document is organized into six primary chapters and appendices. The first chapter provides a general introduction while chapters 2-6 provide specific design guidelines.

- **Chapter 1: Introduction.** This chapter defines the purpose and role of design guidelines, how they are used, their policy foundation, and the design review process. It also describes how to plan, undertake and review a historic preservation project, including making a determination of historic significance.
- **Chapter 2: Guidelines for Preserving and Altering Historic Buildings.** This chapter provides the design guidelines that apply to individually-designated landmark structures (Denver landmarks) and contributing structures in historic districts. It focuses on maintenance and alteration of historic structures, including historically-significant building additions. Particular emphasis is placed on preserving existing energy-efficient features, including porches, transoms, and operable windows, as well as maintaining the historic materials that define the character of historic properties.
- **Chapter 3: Guidelines for Additions to Historic Buildings.** This chapter provides design guidelines to promote compatible additions to landmark structures and contributing structures in historic districts. It focuses on compatible location, massing characteristics, and materials.
- **Chapter 4: Guidelines for New Buildings and Non-Contributing Buildings.** This chapter provides design guidelines to promote compatible new construction in historic districts throughout Denver, and alterations to non-contributing structures that are compatible with the historic context. It focuses on designs that can be recognized as new construction while remaining compatible with the surrounding historic context.
- **Chapter 5: Guidelines for Site and Landscape Design.** This chapter provides design guidance for the design of sites, as well as the treatment of historic landscape features relating to individually-designated Denver landmark structures and properties in historic districts.
- **Chapter 6: Guidelines for Signs.** This chapter provides guidance for signage on Denver landmark structures and historic districts.
- **Appendices.** The appendices include unique guidelines for the La Alma Lincoln Park Historic Cultural District, and a glossary of terms.

### Chapter Format

The standard format of each chapter includes a topic heading, followed by intent statements related to the topic and numbered guidelines. Photographs, illustrations, or diagrams may also be included to support the intent statements and guidelines.

- **Intent Statements.** Establish the goals to be achieved through application of the guidelines for each topic and may also be used to determine the appropriateness of alternative or innovative approaches. Intent statements are numbered by chapter for cross-referencing.
- **Guidelines.** Describe a desired outcome related to the intent statements. They are organized and numbered by topic for ease of reference within their corresponding chapter.

