

Purpose

By City code, a Certificate of Appropriateness must be obtained from the Historic Preservation Commission prior to exterior alterations (including signs) in the designated Historic Districts.

The purpose of this manual is to explain the guidelines used by the Commission in determining appropriate sign design, construction, and installation in the Downtown Historic District.

The Commission utilizes the Secretary of the Interior's Standards in the review of building alteration proposals in the District. Those standards do not address signage, so there is a need to provide the community with guidelines to ensure the appropriate design and installation of signs in the District.

Design is a subjective art. This manual is not intended to limit creativity, but to provide a frame of reference within which to work. Its purpose is to protect the District's character, while allowing for the legitimate needs of commerce. Types of signs, lettering, materials, and colors are explored. Also explained is the procedure for making application to the Commission for a Certificate of Appropriateness.

Nothing in these guidelines is intended to supersede the requirements of the Land Development Code pertaining to signs.

Premise

The unique historical character of the District is primary in importance; the sign is considered secondary. A sign should be designed to integrate with the architectural features of the building. In short, a sign must complement the character of the Historic District, rather than detract from it.

In designing a sign for placement in the Downtown Historic District, it is important to keep in mind the above premise by which the Historic Preservation Commission operates and reviews Certificates of Appropriateness for signs.

The Commission believes signs that conform to these guidelines and are visible from both the sidewalk and street will satisfy the legitimate needs of commerce without visual clutter, and without obstructing the view of the buildings.

The appeal of restored turn-of-the-century commercial architecture draws customer traffic to the Historic District. Signs that detract from the overall character of the District only serve to lessen the positive impact of the many millions of dollars of public and private reinvestment since the Historic District was designated in 1986.

Definitions

AWNING SIGN: A sign painted on or applied to an awning or canopy, or a sign made by removing material from an awning.

CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS (COA): Indicates that a project has been reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission and is deemed appropriate for the local historic districts. The review must be conducted in a public hearing.

HANGING SIGN: Any sign suspended from an awning, canopy, bracket, or brace.

INTERNAL ILLUMINATION: A sign designed to be lit from the inside, including cabinet signs and channel letters, but generally excluding neon.

LAND DEVELOPMENT CODE (LDC): The unified code adopted by the City of San Marcos in 2004. It contains, among other things, the former Sign and Historic Preservation ordinances.

PEDESTRIAN SIGN: A sign oriented to pedestrian or street-level visibility.

PRIMARY SIGN: The main sign identifying a business. Each downtown business may have one primary sign.

PROJECTING SIGN: Any sign attached to and placed perpendicular or at an angle to a building facade.

SECONDARY SIGN: A smaller sign than the primary, which may contain business details or may be oriented to pedestrians

SIGN: Any object or display used to advertise or identify a business, person, organization or event.

SIGN FRIEZE: A horizontal band across the building façade, usually above the transom and below the second story windows.

TEMPORARY SIGNS: A sign or banner generally designed for temporary or seasonal use mounted on building facades in the District. Temporary signs are limited to a 90 day display period per year.

WINDOW SIGN: Any sign applied to or located within 12 inches of an exterior window.

Procedure

The process for obtaining approval for the design and installation of a sign in the District:

Obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness application **and** a Sign Permit application from the City's Planning and Development Services office or online at www.ci.san-marcos.tx.us (*samples attached*). The Planning Department will assist you in completing the application, and will place it on the agenda for the next available meeting of the Historic Preservation Commission. The meetings are usually held once a month at 5:45 p.m. in City Hall.

In addition to a completed application, the applicant must submit:

1. A scale drawing of the proposed sign;
2. A rendering of the sign's placement in relation to the building; and
3. Sign material and color samples.

The applicant or representative presents the request to the Commission during a public hearing. Property owners within 200 feet are notified of the public hearing and invited to respond to the request. After review, the Commission will: approve the project as submitted; approve with conditions; recommend changes; or reject the proposal and issue a written statement of the reason(s).

Once the Certificate of Appropriateness is approved, a sign permit may be issued. **These steps must be completed before the sign is installed.** Separate building permits may be required, depending on the scope of work. Building Inspections will inspect the project after completion to ensure that the work is in compliance with the permits.

Before you invest in a sign:

Evaluate your needs

- Define your budget.
- Will your sign merely identify the business, or is it necessary to provide product information?
- Decide whether illumination is necessary.
- Is the sign intended for pedestrians, motorists, or both?
- Consider the most appropriate material for your use and budget.

Evaluate your building

- Do you have historic photos of the building?
- Visualize the sign in relation to the entire building façade. The sign should not dominate.
- Select a location that does not cover important architectural details.
 - o hanging under a cornice
 - o painted on glass windows
 - o attached to the building
 - o projecting from the building
 - o painted on an awning
 - o mounted on the canopy face
- Look at the color of your building and adjacent structures when choosing a sign color

Apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness and Sign Permit

Quality is important! A simple, well-made sign will do more for your business than a cheap, sloppy one.

Need help? The Commission offers assistance. Contact the Planning Department at 512-393-8230.

Design

Design is the orchestration of letter styles, colors, materials, size, placement, and originality into a unified graphic expression. Although design can be subjective, our desire is to help the business owner achieve a quality design that is consistent with the Historic District. The designer must keep the integrity of the architecture and District character foremost in the final product.

Placement: Placement should be the first consideration in a historic district. Upon deciding on wall mount, awning, or other, the design can be arranged within certain parameters. **Signs should not obscure or compete with architectural details of the building.**

Size: Size will be determined by architectural constraints. Proper proportions are crucial. **Attached signage is limited to 10% of the building façade by the Land Development Code.**

Copy: The business needs to be adequately identified; but too much information reduces legibility.

Lettering: Choose simple letter styles and colors that can be easily seen and read. Sign colors should complement the building colors.

Impression: The design of your sign will usually be the first impression that your business makes. Chose a designer carefully and require the level of quality your business and San Marcos deserve.

Guidelines

These Guidelines present rules and suggestions for sign type, placement, lettering size, color, and material. They were developed specifically for the San Marcos Downtown Historic District.

“Guidelines” are not as strict as the standards of city code. The Commission may interpret them with some flexibility, and one guideline may be relaxed to facilitate another determined to be more important in a particular case. The overall objective is to ensure that the spirit and intent of the guidelines are followed.

In this section, general rules pertaining to a particular sign element will be explained. The Commission has attempted to clarify rules through graphic illustrations when available.

It was the Commission’s intention from the beginning to accentuate the positive. Accordingly, in most cases, pictures are utilized to show elements of sign design that have been well executed. Some photographs have been selected to illustrate the use of signs in a manner that would not be considered appropriate for the District. That is not to say that the sign or its use is universally inappropriate, only that it is so for our purposes here.

The nature of design dictates that every proposal be evaluated on its own merit, and balanced with the actual experience on which these guidelines are partly based.

Sign Types

Types of signs addressed here include primary, secondary, temporary, and freestanding. Not all types are suitable or allowed in the Downtown historic district.

PRIMARY SIGNS:

A primary sign is the sign designed to be viewed from the street on a daily basis. It will represent the owner's largest sign expense and is likely the most important of the sign types. Only one primary sign is allowed per business.

The primary sign should effectively project the business' identity, without detracting from the building.

This simple sign lets the beauty of the building do the talking.



Avoid too much information. The viewer will spend only a few seconds looking at the sign.



SECONDARY SIGNS:

Secondary signs are utilized in addition to the primary building sign. Typically, a secondary sign will be in a window, hanging under a canopy, or affixed to the side of a corner building. Where a secondary sign is affixed to the side of a corner building, it should not be greater in size than the primary sign.

Secondary signs may be targeted to the pedestrian, while the primary sign is intended to be viewed from the street.

The secondary sign may deal with the details of business operations, such as hours. This is especially true in the case of window signs.



Secondary signs in the form of hanging signs are especially helpful when the primary building sign is not visible from the sidewalk.

The Commission encourages the use of hanging signs.



Temporary Signs:

Temporary signs and banners are regulated by the City's Land Development Code. No permit fee is charged for a temporary sign, but an information sheet must be turned in to the Planning Department showing the size, location, date of installation and length of display. Code standards are:

- maximum size: 32 square feet
- number of signs: one per street frontage; maximum of 2 per lot
- length of display: 90 days per calendar year. Real estate signs may be displayed while the property is for sale or lease. This does not apply to residential units for lease on a continuous basis.

Temporary signs and banners may not cover significant architectural details.

Signs of a temporary nature will not be permitted as permanent signs.

The Commission will review temporary signs which appear inappropriate for the downtown historic district, and may request that such signs be removed.

Freestanding Signs:

Because building coverage is maximized in the Downtown area, and setbacks minimized, it is unlikely a freestanding (pole) sign could be erected in the historic district. Any proposal would need to meet the location and setback requirements of the Land Development Code, as well as the design criteria for a Certificate of Appropriateness. Such requests will be addressed on an individual basis.

Sign Placement & Size

Placement or location of signs is perhaps the most critical factor in maintaining the order and integrity of the Downtown Historic District. The size and shape of a sign should be proportional with the scale of the structure. Signs should be designed so that they are integrated with the design of the building.

A general rule of thumb for maximum sign size is 1.5 square feet for every one foot of façade width, **subject to the maximum allowed by the sign ordinance**. For instance, a building that is twenty feet wide could accommodate a sign of thirty square feet: $20 \times 1.5 = 30$. This does not mean that the sign should always be as large as the general rule allows. **Total signage on a building may not exceed 10% of the façade area.**

Signs should not obscure or compete with architectural details of the building façade. The sign should be designed to integrate with the architectural features and not detract from them.

A *frieze*, or horizontal band across the building, is an appropriate sign location. When utilizing the sign frieze, it is important to respect its borders. The sign should not overlap or crowd the top, bottom, or ends of the frieze.

Window signs are included in the 10% overall maximum sign area, regardless of whether or not they require a permit. Internally illuminated canister signs are no longer allowed, and stock trade name signs are inappropriate for the district.

Awning or canopy signs must conform to the same size requirements as signs attached directly to the building; that is, 1.5 square feet for every one foot of façade width, up to a maximum of 10% of the façade area.

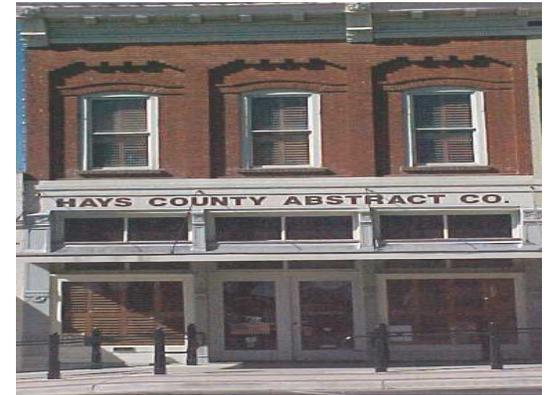
Signs in multiple tenant buildings should be designed to complement the other signs on the building.

Turn-of-the-century buildings often have a sign frieze.

This is the ideal location for the sign. It is typically above the transom and below the second floor window.



Yes



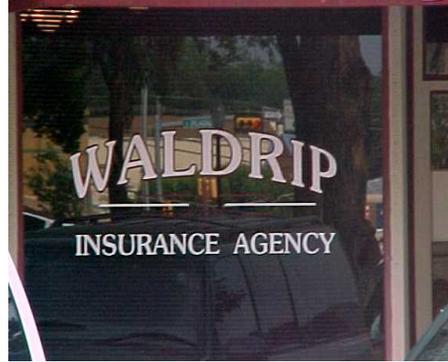
Yes

Signs should not obscure or compete with architectural details of the building.



No - out of scale with the building and covers details

Widow signs should be limited to 30% coverage of the glass area. These signs are included in the overall 10% of façade calculation.



Yes



No – too much coverage

Primary projecting signs must provide a minimum clearance of 9 feet between the sidewalk surface and the bottom of the sign. They may not extend closer than 18 inches to the curb, or above the peak of the roof. The size is limited to 10% of the façade.



Yes



No – extends above roof

When multiple tenants work together, their signs can be coordinated. The look is uniform, yet each has its own style.



Hanging signs must provide at least 8 feet clearance above the sidewalk. They should be sized in proportion to the space allocated.



Awning or canopy signs should conform to the same size standards as signboards; that is, 1.5 square feet for every one foot of façade width, but no larger than 10% of the total facade.



Sign Lettering

The style, size, and spacing of letters determine whether a sign is easy to read or confusing. Selection of lettering should be based on readability and the desired image projected by the sign. Flamboyant or intricate lettering may be attractive, but it can also be difficult to read. Because the objective of a good sign is to have its message read quickly, clear and simple lettering is best.

STYLE:

There are three basic types of lettering: *decorative*, serif, and sans serif. Generally, decorative styles such as Gothic, Old English, or script are too complex to be easily read on a sign. Serif and sans serif styles are easy to read and simple enough to be appropriate for many periods of architecture and types of signs. The difference between the two type styles is the small spur, or “serif” attached to each letter. Lettering without spurs (“sans serif”) is perceived as more modern. Serif lettering gives a formal, decorative appearance that is timeless enough for all kinds of businesses and signs. Either style is suitable today.

SIZE:

“The bigger the better” does not always apply to lettering. Letter size must be proportionate to the sign area. Background and border space is needed so the sign does not appear crowded.

SPACING:

The spacing of letters is a matter of proper judgment; an experienced designer should be consulted in this regard. The important elements are inter-letter, inter-word, and inter-line spacing. Sufficient “air space” increases readability.

This business owner obtained old photographs of his building, and patterned his sign after the one installed in 1906. Initially, there was concern that the lettering size was excessive, but historic documentation showed the building was large enough to accommodate it. Air space around the borders keeps the sign from appearing too crowded.



Sign Color:

Color is one of the most important aspects of visual communication. It adds richness to every environment. However, too many colors may confuse or negate the message of a sign. Use discretion. An otherwise well-planned sign may look unattractive due to poor color selection.

Color can establish a unity among buildings of different scale, shape, or texture. Attention to this will make your sign part of an entire setting rather than an awkward element that is obviously added on. This integration is what gives the district a cohesive image. Choose colors related to the building façade or surrounding environment.

Limit the number of colors used in any one sign. Small accents of color make a sign unique and attractive, but the competition of many different colors diminishes its effectiveness.

Contrast is an important factor in your sign's legibility. Light letters on a dark background are most legible, particularly when the sign size is constrained. This background isolates the individual message and, in areas where signs are numerous, greatly increases readability of each sign.

Traffic signs, now standardized throughout the country, are a good example of effective contrast between letters and background. The principles that guide the development of traffic signs apply to commercial signs as well, except that commercial signs can use a wider range of colors and letter styles.

Because most buildings are fairly neutral in color (earth tones, brick and stone, or muted paint), bright, intense colored signs draw attention away from the building. The sign can be the best place to add a splash of lively color to the overall paint scheme of a building, **but care should be taken to ensure that the sign colors complement and relate to the building, creating a visually coherent storefront.**

Sign color should complement the paint scheme of the building.



Yes



Yes

Sign Materials

Signs are fabricated from many materials: wood, metal, glass, plastic, stone, concrete, and even cloth and paper in certain circumstances. While there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these materials, they are not all appropriate for use in the Historic District. Even appropriate materials, used in an insensitive manner, can diminish the visual appeal of the District.

WOOD:

Wood is the most traditional sign material. This is due to its near universal availability and great versatility. With simple tools and methods, wood can be carved, formed, incised, glued, painted on, or worked in relief. With more elaborate equipment, wood can be routed and sandblasted. Wood has a variety of grains, textures, and colors, which may be emphasized to decorative advantage or concealed. In most cases, wood or signboard is utilized in the District because of its availability and suitability for painting and mounting.

METAL:

Metal is also a traditional sign material. It can be formed in a variety of ways – etched, embossed, cut, cast, wrought, rolled, or extruded, making it a versatile material. It has the advantage of being very durable and, particularly in the case of aluminum, needs little maintenance.

Some disadvantages to metal signs are that they can dent easily, changing the surface and damaging protective finishes. Rust and corrosion are common problems with metal signs.

Gold-leafing and silver-leafing are another way in which metal can be used in sign fabrication. These materials carry an image of quality and elegance, and are most effective when used in strong contrast to the color and texture of the background material. The reflective ability of the gold and silver enhance the play of light on the surface of the sign, adding to its visual appeal.

Metal is often used in fabrication of sign brackets, both simple and ornamental.

GLASS:

Glass, too, is a traditional sign material. Stained glass has a long history in display and, when carefully crafted, can make a rich and delightful sign. The most common use of glass as a sign material is the display window. Objects and activities observable within a shop are, in effect, signs. At the pedestrian level, window displays have far more potential for expressing the identity of the business than the signs mounted on the building. Window display signs are used extensively in the District.

PLASTIC

Plastic as a sign material is discouraged in the District. Internally illuminated plastic box signs are no longer allowed. There are some cases where the Commission will consider the use of plastic for a sign, however, such cases are rare, and the justification must be compelling. New techniques of working plastic may result in appropriate signage. Requests will be reviewed on a case by case basis, and money should not be invested prior to approval.

NEON

Neon - a sign material as well as a means of lighting – is now generally considered “historic.” When used properly, neon can create a lyrical quality that few other materials can duplicate. It is often used to complement art deco architecture.

The appropriateness of neon will depend on its application, and each proposal must be reviewed individually. In considering neon, keep the overall design and color scheme simple. Stock trademark signs are not appropriate for window display in the District.

Neon works well with Art Deco styles.



Sign Lighting

Light, like color, can provide more effective visual communication. However, when used inappropriately, it can produce visual irritation and detract from the character of the building. Signs should have lighting only when necessary. A well-designed window display illuminated at night is far more desirable than an illuminated sign.

External illumination is the preferred method for the Downtown historic district.

EXTERNAL LIGHTING:

A projected light source, either above or below the sign, is recommended if lighting is necessary. Projected lighting emphasizes the building as well as the sign so the sign becomes an integral part of the façade. This is not so with internal illumination.

Use small, unobtrusive fixtures that do not overpower the sign or structure. Fixtures should be shielded to prevent glare on the street and sidewalk.

INTERNAL LIGHTING:

Internal lighting in general is considered inappropriate in the District because it places emphasis solely on the sign. Neon may be considered as an exception as discussed under Sign Materials.

Internally illuminated cabinet (box) signs are no longer allowed. Those in place prior to adoption of the Historic Preservation Ordinance still remain, but may not be replaced.

In interpreting the intent of these guidelines, the Commission may determine that under a certain circumstance internal lighting is appropriate. Individually illuminated letters, either internally illuminated or back-lighted solid letters (reverse channel) would be the only acceptable options. If approved, electrical transformer boxes, conduit, and raceways must be concealed from public view.

When illumination is required, external lighting is encouraged.



Yes - lighting from below



Yes - lighting from above

Sample Applications and Attachments