

# **St. Johnsbury Design Review Workbook**

## **DESIGN REVIEW**

The visual and historic character of the Town of St. Johnsbury represents an important asset by providing a source of pleasure for both residents and visitors, and by contributing substantially to the economic base of the community and to its tax base. The Design Review process helps to insure that buildings within the District are properly related to their sites and to their neighbors, and that proper attention is given to the exterior appearances of buildings and their sites to safeguard the historical and architectural legacy. Preservation and enhancement of the Town's architectural character, while providing a framework for economic revitalization, will attract new business, residents and tourists, and maintain a sense of place unique to St. Johnsbury.

The St. Johnsbury Planning Commission has asked the Design Review Committee to review permit applications for signs, renovations, demolitions, new construction and site alterations for properties within the Design Control District and make recommendations on the applications to the applicant, Development Review Board and/or Zoning Administrator on behalf of the Planning Commission. This review takes place prior to the final action by the Planning Commission, Development Review Board and/or Zoning Administrator. A complete procedure for this process is available from the Town's Zoning Administration Office in the Town Offices at 51 Depot Square, Suite 3.

## **WORKBOOK PURPOSE**

The prime purpose of this Workbook is to serve as a guide for the Design Review Committee (DRC) of the St. Johnsbury Planning Commission in carrying out its responsibilities in the Design Review District, as established under Vermont Statutes Annotated, Title 24, Chapter 4407, Section 402. The intent is to preserve and enhance the architectural character and historical values of St. Johnsbury while providing a framework for economic revitalization.

The Workbook will serve as a guide for individuals who are considering projects in the District, and will also serve as an information source on St. Johnsbury, giving school children and interested citizens alike some insight into their town. A knowledgeable citizenry, that understands St. Johnsbury's potential and takes pride in its attractive surroundings, is the best means of achieving future improvements.

## **CONTENTS**

The Workbook is organized into three sections. The first section deals with goals for the future, design concepts for future development, and specific design recommendations. It is to this section that one would look for graphic suggestions when considering a project. The second section outlines standards for new construction, restoration, and streetscape elements. This section suggests basic rules to be followed in development of the District.

The third section describes special qualities of historical and architectural interest in many of the District's buildings, and techniques and methods for restoring materials and features found in these and similar buildings.

## **USE**

The Design Review Committee uses this workbook as a guideline in reviewing proposed projects within St. Johnsbury's Design Control District. The Committee assumes the attitude that reasonable variances or deviations from these guidelines may be favorably viewed when literal application of the standards results in hardship, or where innovative or new solutions warrant such a variance. Variances, however, must be in conformity with the general intent and purposes of the Workbook and must be in keeping with the long term goals established for the Town.

## **GOALS FOR THE FUTURE**

The attitudes and aspiration of many people in St. Johnsbury regarding their vision of the future of the town have been gathered and reported in the "Historic Main Street Partnership Study" (November 2000). The Mission Statement of the Design Review Committee summarizes the intent of many people in St. Johnsbury as established in the Municipal Town Plans: "To support and nurture a community center where people live, shop, work, play and engage in cultural activities by preserving a sense of history, making the best use of existing assets, and planning for future development." The following goals supporting that mission will provide a basis for future planning and future decisions, and if followed, will result in a certain consistent quality in future development.

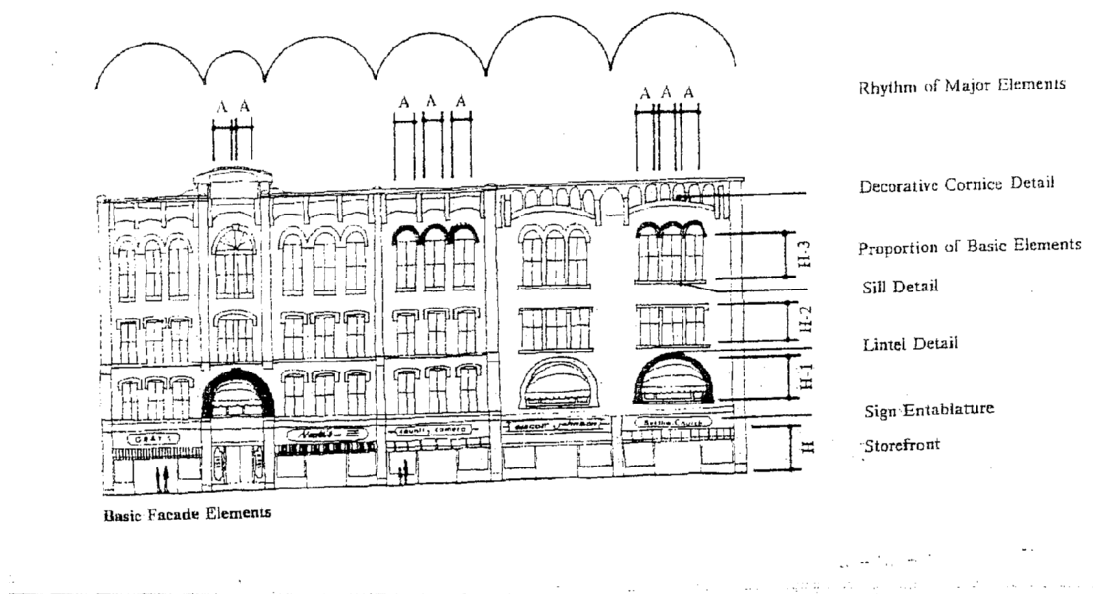
1. Improve the appearance and functionality of the downtown and its adjacent neighborhood (Railroad Street, Eastern Avenue and Main Street) buildings.
2. Create a unified streetscape throughout the downtown and village of St. Johnsbury using lights, signage, trees and other street furnishings.
3. Optimize the pedestrian experience and improve vehicular movement.
4. Architectural and historically significant buildings are a valuable asset, are worth saving, and can and should be adapted for modern functions.
7. Mixed usage of space in the downtown should be encouraged. People coming and going at various times of day and night adds vitality and security to the Town.

## **NEW OR REPLACEMENT CONSTRUCTION STANDARDS**

New or replacement construction should contribute to the unity of the St. Johnsbury Townscape. The Town has distinct downtown-commercial areas, educational areas, and residential areas, and mixed use areas, all of which have their own unique qualities. St. Johnsbury's character is the sum of all these qualities, it has been stated earlier that many of the buildings in all three areas have historical and architectural significance, are assets to the Town, and should be preserved. These original buildings form a strong physical environment in the Town. It is important that new buildings and renovations on old buildings be compatible with the historical context, while at the same time, expressing the thinking and values of the time in which they are built or renovated. Virtually every street in St. Johnsbury contains some elements that create relationships and a rhythm that

gives the street its unity and character. Every new construction and replacement will be different, but an awareness of the adjacent environment is a basic step towards successful design solutions.

The typical building in the commercial/mixed use district is three stories high with a storefront on the street level, separated from the upper building by a horizontal sign entablature band. See the adjoining diagram.



This basic framework has created in the Town a tradition of handsome buildings that achieve their variety through detail and a strong relationship of related elements. The rhythm and repetition of materials like brick, cut granite, and wood, and elements such as window openings, cornices, sills, lintels, bays and other decorative details provide unity to entire blocks.

The diagram indicates buildings built at different times that are very closely related through the repetition and recalling of the various elements. The Streetscape, or unity of an existing street or neighborhood, is a major consideration in the design of any new or replacement construction. This is of particular importance in the mixed use district where buildings adjoin one another to create overall building forms that are the assembly of many parts. The new building must relate in materials and colors, form, massing, proportion, set-back and rhythm of common elements to those that are present on adjacent buildings. This is not to say that adjoining details and design motifs should be copied, but only that enough of these elements be carried on in contemporary terms to maintain the unity of the block. It is also very possible that a new or replacement building can provide the transition element between apparently unrelated elements along a Street or block.

## **Guidelines for Design Review Considerations**

St. Johnsbury is unique in that many of its intact nineteenth century buildings are by the same local architect, Lambert Packard. There are excellent commercial, residential and institutional examples of many architectural styles, and it is this rich Victorian legacy that gives St. Johnsbury its special character. Our purpose is to provide guidelines and alternatives for quality replacement or restoration of architecturally or historically significant buildings. As thoughtful improvements are carried out, a beneficial contribution is made to the individual property and to the total community as well, by preserving for the future the best of the past.

The following guidelines have been developed to aid those contemplating new or replacement buildings or restoration or renovation of existing buildings in St. Johnsbury. Each situation will have its own unique challenges/opportunities. It is the intent of these guidelines only to try to point the way to design solutions.

### **Guidelines for New or Replacement Construction:**

#### **Residential AND Commercial Areas**

1. It is of prime importance to analyze the elements that provide visual continuity on a street or block in order that an overall unity be maintained or enhanced.
2. New construction should be the product of its own time and not be a copy of an older architectural style with associated details no longer practical.
3. The massing of a new building must maintain the existing wall line or setback line of a street facade.
4. Areas in front of the buildings should be considered an important part of the project. Pedestrian amenity in the form of paving, planting, benches, etc. is desirable not only for its pleasant effect on individual buildings, but also for its effect on the quality of the town as a whole.

#### **Residential Areas**

1. In buildings of close proximity, entire blocks are considered to be one neighborhood. Therefore, consideration of the following is important:
  - materials,

#### **Commercial Areas**

1. In buildings of close proximity, entire blocks are considered to be one façade. Therefore, one must recognize:
  - materials
  - scale
  - rhythm of neighboring façade elements, and
  - common details.
2. Maintain the cornice line and the sign entablature line of existing buildings in a block.
3. The area of a commercial building below the sign entablature line, referred to as the storefront zone, may depart in design from the building above, as long as materials used are compatible with the entire building and its neighbors. It is assumed that the primary storefront material will be glass and a recessed entrance offering protection from the weather is recommended.
4. The use of retractable awnings is to be encouraged as part of a storefront. Awnings add color and movement to the street, and provide pedestrian protection from the weather, as well as provide sun control for displayed merchandise.

- colors,
  - scale
  - rhythm of neighboring façade elements, and common details.
2. Maintaining the streetscape through parking, landscaping and screening is important.
  3. Preservation historic style or intended use.
  5. Signs on a new building should relate in size and character to others on the block.

### **Guidelines for Restoration and Renovation:**

In consideration of a building restoration effort, the following general statements should be kept in mind:

1. Buildings must function to meet today's needs just as they met certain needs in the time they were built. The changes required to meet new demands should be a compromise between the existing integrity of the structure and the new functions. Good preservation seeks both of these goals.
2. Every attempt should be made to preserve as much of a building's original design, architectural details, and building materials as is possible. Such materials are often irreplaceable: they offer an integrity and genuineness, which cannot be duplicated or copied.
3. When it is necessary to introduce modern elements or components to an original building exterior, every effort must be made to maintain the integrity of the building's overall architectural character.
4. If there is any doubt to accurately maintain or restore a building, it is strongly urged that the owner seek professional advice. Too often buildings have been rehabilitated without regard for their real historic or architectural assets.

### **Considerations for Property Alterations and Development:**

Based on the concepts and general statements in the Construction and Restoration Standards sections above, the following considerations should serve as the basis for Design Review Committee recommendations and subsequent Planning and Zoning action:

1. Preservation or reconstruction of historic style and intended use.
2. Harmony of exterior design with other properties in the neighborhood.
3. Compatibility of the exterior materials and color schemes to be used with other properties in the neighborhood.
4. Full landscaping shall be maintained between the building's façade and the street, and parking shall not be created in this area.
5. Compatibility of the proposed landscaping and screening with other properties in the neighborhood.
6. Location and appearance of all utilities, including lighting, to make the most of the desirable elements of the design.
7. Compatibility with uses of neighboring properties.

**SPECIAL QUALITIES OF HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL  
INTEREST IN THE DESIGN REVIEW DISTRICT EASTERN AVENUE  
from top of hill downward:**

1. The Courthouse Park defines the Town's most important corner. It signifies today's vitality in the groups of young people "hanging out" and older residents enjoying a Monday night Band Concert, or attending to business at the County Court. It also ties us to the past, for our focus is on the Statue of "America" our unique Civil War Soldiers Memorial.
2. Knights of Pythias Block on the Thaddeus Lane corner, built in 1893, destroyed by fire a year and a half later, then immediately rebuilt to the original plans, including the distinguishing tower and a large third floor hall used originally for Lodge meetings, then for dancing lessons and Saturday night dances, and now for karate lessons. The lower floor has housed Cowles Press since 1909.
3. Across Thaddeus Lane, the white stucco building with exposed faux timbers began life in 1883 as the Presbyterian Church, daringly designed by Lambert Packard, for it was very different from the other (steepled) churches in town. After this congregation dwindled a few years later, the tall stained glass window and distinguished doorway facing the Avenue were removed, and the building was remodeled for a store (currently Aja's Pizza) and two stories of apartments.
4. Palmer Brothers Laundry has a brick façade which is similar to others on the street in scale and design, but which covers the original 1877 brick square structure, of which the mansard roof is still visible from several vantage points.
5. The Old Post Office was built with neo-classic elegance and trim details in 1923. Note the harmony of the pediment over the entry with that of the Masonic Temple next door.
6. Across the street, Sign of the Dial Clock Shop and its adjacent buildings are on a smaller scale, reminiscent of their mid-1800's historic period.
7. Next door, the Towne House Apartments began life in 1882 as the Roy Block, a large wooden structure with two stores on the street level. 'When it was refurbished in the early 1970's, only slight cosmetic changes were made to the exterior.
8. Across the street, the neo-classic Masonic Temple is an equally large scaled, though more "grand" building in this important part of town. It was built in 1912 and deemed the finest in the state.
9. The adjacent octagonal buildings at Windhorse Commons have recently been upgraded and preserved to retain the original features. The centerpiece is a fine brick house of the 1850's with a beautiful interior, including a spiral staircase. Together with its unusual octagonal barn and octagonal brick office building, it is probably unmatched in its kind by any other house in the country. Octagonal houses are the result of a book by the Rev. Orson Fowler, which described the many advantages of living in octagonal homes, thus making them more popular. St. Johnsbury must be the only small town in the United States with two such houses, one of them with octagonal out-buildings. The fountain in the center of the complex is a pleasant reminder of the many fountains and water troughs that graced St. Johnsbury's streets and parks during the horse and buggy days.
10. The Calderwood Block, site of many State Offices, was built in 1915 to take advantage of the slope, with one large store facing the Avenue, and another on a

lower level with its entrance off Pearl Street. It has been tastefully modernized, in keeping with the pedestrian and building scale of the original.