

Swarthmore Town Center Design Guidelines

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Introduction

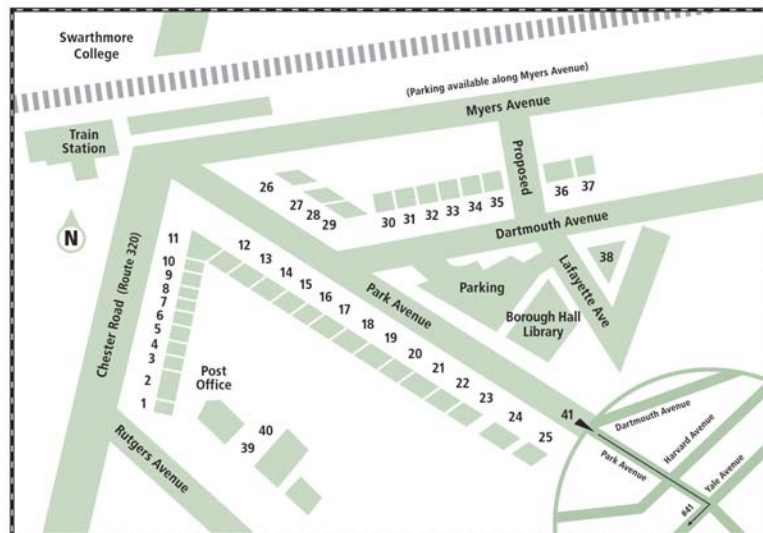
Swarthmore has an attractive, pedestrian-friendly village atmosphere that is highly valued by residents and visitors alike. The sustained vitality of the downtown area depends on its continued ability to play a central role in the lives of its residents, fulfill daily needs and tasks, and leave a lasting impression on visitors. The release of the 1999 Revitalization Strategy and rapid follow-through on many of its initial goals attests to the priority the Borough and Swarthmore Town Center, Inc. have placed on the feedback of Swarthmore residents and business owners. This revitalization plan sets a course to protect and enhance the “small town flavor”, traditional architecture, and economic health of the community at large and the downtown in particular. By building on its unique, historic character, and thus improving the appearance of the town center overall, it is hoped that Swarthmore will remain a healthy and vibrant place for present and future residents, business and property owners, as well as visitors.

The purpose of these design guidelines is to protect and enhance those very qualities that draw people to visit, live and work in Swarthmore. More specifically, they meet an objective of the revitalization strategy to

“encourage appropriate facade improvements by property owners”.

“Appropriate” can be a difficult term when trying to balance the rights of property owners and differing aesthetic tastes with a community’s desire for a cohesive identity that reflects more traditional periods of development. Here, “appropriate” is defined in the context of the unique architectural characteristics of Swarthmore’s downtown buildings, of which there are different periods and styles. Incongruous themes, franchise architecture and allusions to a false history are considered inappropriate. The recommendations presented here are not meant to dictate design, nor take the place of a professional commercial designer; rather, they are a framework to help individual designs contribute to and enhance the community’s vision.

The geographic focus of these guidelines is on the town’s commercial and civic hub. Swarthmore town center is bound by Chester Road to the west, Myers Avenue to the north, and Rutgers Avenue to the south. To the east, the town center is located west of Borough Hall along Park Avenue and west of 333 Dartmouth Avenue.





Organization and Goals

Buildings differ by age, design and in how they have been treated and altered over the years. Basic maintenance and minor repair work are ongoing needs for every building in town, but such tasks don't have to cost a lot to have a great visual impact. They should, however, be done with respect for the traditional characteristics of the façade. Simple ways to do this are discussed in the section on **Exterior Maintenance and Rehabilitation**, which addresses typical maintenance tasks and minor repairs in a way that will protect and enhance a building's traditional qualities.

Over time, more aggressive repairs and alterations may be necessary or desired-(i.e., additions, enclosures, or new storefronts). Larger scale projects have a higher potential to affect the character of the building and overall appearance of the streetscape in a positive way. For example, an owner could use the opportunity to reverse past alterations that diminished a building's character, by restoring the original storefront and detailing and contributing to the traditional appearance. Owners of potentially historic structures should seek professional design assistance to maintain the historic integrity of the building, while complementing it as described in **Infill**. However, not all buildings in the town center would be considered "traditional", historic (more than 50 years old) or having a high architectural character. For these structures, major changes and construction would follow the standards found in the section on **New Storefronts**.

These guidelines are based upon the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for the Rehabilitation of Historic Structures. While not all structures in Swarthmore are historically significant or "traditional", the principles listed here can safely guide the rehabilitation and renovation of older downtowns. These goals are:

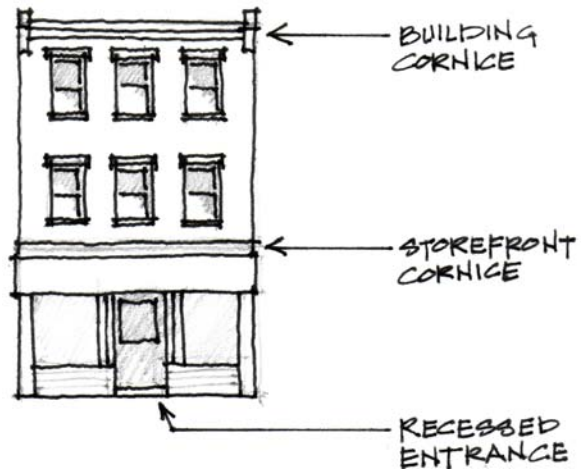
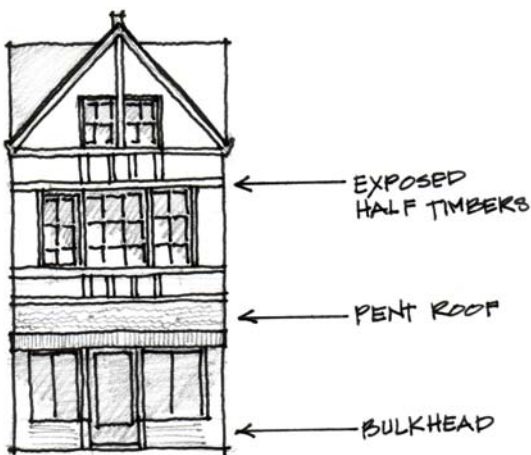
1. Preserve historic materials and character while keeping a building in use, at times by accommodating new uses.
2. Any cleaning of the building materials and features shall be done by the gentlest means possible. No sandblasting, power washing or other abrasive techniques should be undertaken.
3. Repair deteriorated features and materials to the greatest extent possible.
4. Replace, if needed, with matching new materials.
5. Past additions may have acquired historic character of their own and, if so, should also be retained.
6. New additions should complement the historic structure through materials, features, size, scale and proportion, but should also be visually distinguishable and not repeat exact elements of the original building.
7. Do not make changes that artificially "age" the look of the structure or create a false sense of history.

Elements of a Traditional Commercial Facade:

Swarthmore, like most commercial downtowns, has a diverse array of buildings lining its downtown streets. Traditional commercial buildings dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stand side by side with those only just completed. How these buildings relate to each other and how well the old and new blend together defines the look of a streetscape and the visual impact on Swarthmore's visitors. In general, traditional commercial buildings were designed to accommodate commercial uses on the ground floor, with living or office uses located above. The lower storefront level was attractively designed with large display windows to tempt pedestrians with creative displays and inviting atmospheres. In

comparison the upper levels were usually more modestly decorated. This common form, whether Tudor, Victorian or Italianate in style, is found throughout Swarthmore where most buildings have at least two stories and accommodate commercial uses, usually retail, on the ground floor, and living or office quarters above. Contemporary buildings do not share these characteristics and are more likely to be designed and built with a specific single use in mind. Despite differing philosophies even these can be fully integrated into the context of the traditional downtown and even strengthen it.

Common elements of traditional commercial buildings are used throughout these guidelines and are demonstrated below:





Exterior Maintenance and Rehabilitation

The visual payoff for even the simplest type of rehabilitation should never be underestimated. A fresh coat of paint and minor repairs can brighten up any exterior and provide significant impact for relatively little money or effort. However, even these tasks should follow some basic guidelines in order to best care for and maintain a traditional building.

Cleaning and Repair:

- Cleaning of any surface should be done by the gentlest means possible.
- Power washing is never recommended.
- Cleaning of masonry (brick, stone, stucco) should be done with water and mild detergent and natural bristle brushes, and non-harmful chemical solutions.
- Replace materials and features deteriorated beyond repair with like materials. If like materials cannot be found, use synthetic materials that closely match the original in terms of texture, size and color.

Wood: Original design elements should be maintained by scraping, repairing and repainting as needed. Any replacement elements should match the original as closely as possible. Modern siding may be repaired, but owners are encouraged to

remove and replace with materials more closely matching the original, especially on the front facade. If it must be replaced, investigate new options that are made to closely match historic materials in texture and appearance and use on less visible walls.

Brick/ceramic tiles: Clean gently by hand and repair as needed. Replace any missing bricks or tiles with new ones that match the color, size and texture of the existing as closely as possible. Mortar should also closely match in color and composition. As these materials are found in close proximity and in abundance within the town center, mismatches could stand out quite clearly. The pointing should also match that of the surrounding buildings.

Stucco: Be careful to retain the finish of the stucco-- different brush strokes and application methods leave different appearances. Patch small areas if necessary, but be careful again to use stucco similar to the original in strength, color, texture and composition. While large scale patching is preferable to complete replacement, such large areas may require painting.



Exterior Maintenance and Rehabilitation (cont.)

Painting

- Surfaces that are not currently painted should not be painted.
- Removal of paint from woodwork should be avoided unless absolutely necessary, such as when the paint shows deep cracks or blistering and peeling.
- Any removal should be done by the gentlest means possible, i.e., hand scraping or hand sanding. Power washing or sandblasting is never recommended.
- Brick facades may be repainted if historically treated as such. If repainting is not planned, the old color should be permitted to wear off naturally over time and not power washed or chemically removed.
- Colors: Treating the primary surface wall and trim with different, but coordinated colors makes the building more visually pleasing. It is desirable to match the original colors on buildings considered historic when possible. Research (and a little scraping) may help to determine the original color.

Discouraged:

- Painting surfaces that have not previously been painted.
- Using colors that do not blend in with the overall colors of the district.
- Using stark white as an overall surface color.

Colors

Swarthmore is a town of natural colors and building materials: wood, stone, and brick. While this guide does not recommend colors for every building, the general palette consists of a small range of earthy tones: beiges, browns, reds and tans. The Tudor style buildings have faithfully been painted with the “English Brown” from MAB for the trim and Pale Ivory for the stucco, successfully keeping the classic look cohesive.

Keep in mind that white and black can look stark when viewed next to warmer tones, particularly when used over large surfaces. Plan a palette that will use different but complimentary colors on trim and surface areas. This will help accentuate details unique to the façade and make it more visually interesting overall. Local paint stores such as Benjamin Moore, Sherwin Williams, and Swarthmore Hardware’s MAB paint offer historic color palettes from which to choose.

Trim, Surrounds and other details

- Never cover or obscure cornices, trim, or other architectural from view.
- Do not remove detailing, but replace any missing features.
- Repair whenever possible and replace only as a last resort.
- When replacing, choose a replacement that closely matches the original in appearance and materials. This may mean finding local craftsmen who can reproduce such details. Keep photos handy for reference.



Doors

- Keep original door in place and repair as necessary.
- Any replacement door should match the original design and style.

Discouraged: steel or fiberglass doors, wrapped trim, doors with a faux historic theme

Screen or storm doors may be added, but should be as simple as possible so as not to block the view of the door. Full view doors with safety glass are

Windows

- Any original windows should be repaired.
- Scrape and repaint exterior trim as needed.
- Storm windows may be added, but should fit the opening.
- If replacement is necessary, maintain the original opening dimensions and consider replacing the sash only and leaving the original frames and trim intact. Replacement windows should match the original in design, muntin configuration and materials.

Discouraged: vinyl windows, any window not duplicating the design of the original, wrapped trim; changing the dimensions of the original window

Utilities

- While, the placement of existing wires and utilities is often out of a property owner's control, air conditioning units and rooftop utilities could be located in such a way that awnings, parapets, or other elements screen them from view.
- Trash and recycling bins should be kept out of sight, except those designed to be part of the overall streetscape design.



Signs, Awnings & Other Details

Sign Types

Wall Signs- Signs attached and parallel to the primary façade and best viewed looking straight at the building from across the street or driving by.

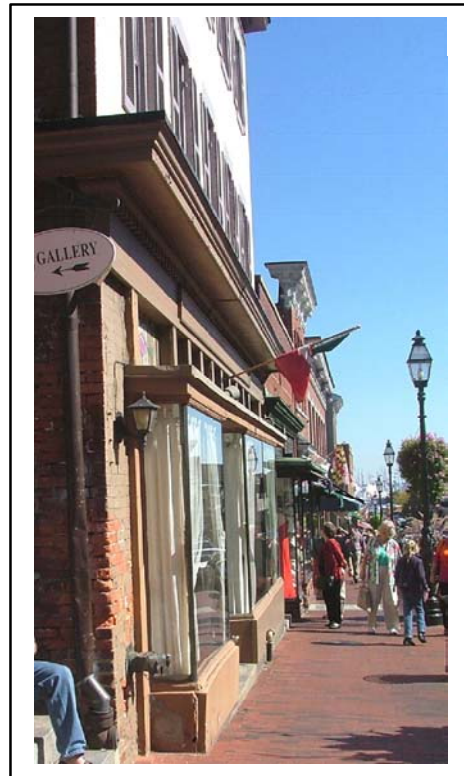
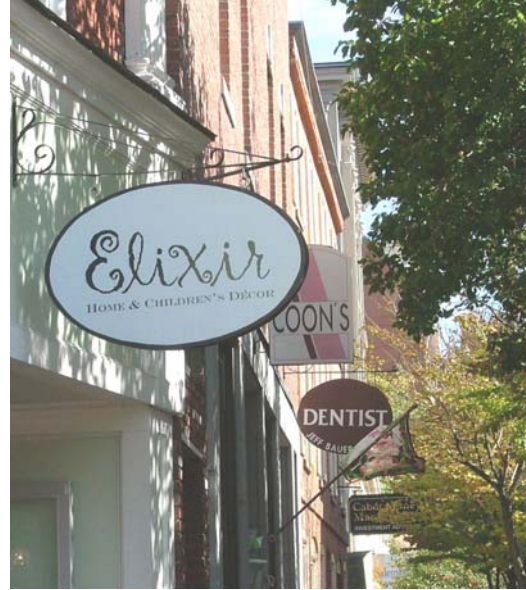
Projecting (Hanging) Signs- A sign projecting from the building over the sidewalk area and to be viewed by pedestrians walking down a sidewalk with limited visibility for vehicles driving by. Projecting signs are usually two-sided so as to be seen from either direction.

Freestanding Signs- Signs that are not attached to the building in any way and may be permanent or temporary, such as A-framed (tent) sandwich boards, which list a day's specials.

Window Signs- Signs or individually applied graphics and lettering applied directly to storefront windows that are best seen at the pedestrian level. These should be carefully placed so as not to obscure the display area—a business's best advertising.

Basics

Attractive signs will be made to complement, and not overwhelm, the structure on which they're found. They will balance size and scale, color, composition, and materials with that of the building itself. Sometimes this means a solid, bright color that contrasts with the building's primary wall colors; while other times this is a subtle, wood carved sign stating the business name. All signs should be simple, easy to read, and used only for basic identification. The number and size of signs must comply with the Swarthmore Borough's sign ordinance, as amended in 2005.





Awnings



The addition of awnings can have a high visual impact, providing a burst of color and decoration to simple facades and permitting space for signage and identification. The use of awnings is generally encouraged to protect shoppers from the elements, providing a more pleasant stroll down the sidewalk. They can also help protect the display items from direct sunlight and provide energy savings by keeping the inside of the store cooler.

Recommendations:

- Placement should be integrated with the character of the buildings. Do not cover or overwhelm architectural details of the façade, but work around them.
- Shape and proportion should match the openings they cover and not overwhelm them or the building as a whole. They should be no longer than a single building.
- Canvas and waterproof cloth materials are encouraged. These will better weather the elements and not as easily fade or discolor as other materials.

- Plastic awnings are not desirable.
- Colors should be chosen to coordinate with the façade's color palette as well as other signs and nearby buildings. Dark backgrounds with lightly colored letters have the highest visual impact and are a popular choice within the town center.

Generally discouraged:

- Stay away from reflective or glossy finishes that may obscure the readers' view.
- Do not use aluminum, vinyl or other plastic materials, which may be more sensitive to weather conditions, especially wind.
- Do not clutter the awning with too much lettering or graphics.
- Because colorful awnings stand out and draw the eye, signs of deterioration, fraying or fading are more immediately noticed and should be remedied.



Flower boxes, flags, etc.

- Flower boxes and flags are a great way to increase the color and interest on otherwise simple facades. But like all details should be chosen wisely to compliment the overall color scheme and avoid clutter.
- Avoid plastic containers. There are very attractive ceramic (or even foam that looks like ceramic) and wood containers that will complement the materials already in use in the town center.
- Try to complement any street “furniture” (benches, trash bins, etc.) provided by the Borough. A cohesive palette and design will improve the overall pleasant appearance for pedestrians strolling down the street.
- Dried, silk or even evergreen arrangements could be used in the off-season and add a festive look.
- Flags are a great way to add additional color.- Choose ones with one or two words maximum (if any) and in colors that complement the storefront.



New Storefronts and Infill

How well buildings relate to each other affects the streetscape and overall cohesive image of the downtown. The bulk, height and street setback are all regulated by the Borough's zoning ordinance that can be found at www.swarthmorepa.org. Within those parameters, however, a designer has ample opportunity to relate to the surrounding context and even strengthen it. For example, the maximum height per the zoning code may permit four stories; however, the adjacent buildings should be taken into account. Four stories may overwhelm the adjacent buildings, which may only be two stories. Similarly with setbacks, new construction should continue the street "wall" formed where adjacent buildings meet the sidewalk. Mismatched efforts take the chance of appearing bulky and inelegant.

Good design cannot be mandated because of its site-specific nature; however, some key elements that should be taken into account include:

Materials: Materials found throughout Swarthmore and highly recommended for new construction and new storefronts are brick, stucco and stone with brick or wood trim. Synthetic materials such as vinyl or aluminum siding should not be used.

Roof Forms: The two roof forms commonly found throughout the town center are flat or very low pitched roofs or the side gable or cross gabled roof. New construction should reflect these choices.

Proportion and arrangement of window and door openings: The arrangement of openings should follow that of the adjacent buildings. Regularly spaced and grouped windows are found along Park Avenue and Chester Road on all stories. In addition to the number and grouping, the overall ratio of windows or door (and thus glass) to the solid wall surface is another factor to be carried over from building to building. Large blocks of solid wall decrease display area and are

unappealing and uninviting for passersby. Also door openings are similar in size and spacing with the secondary, residential doors usually recessed.

Colors: The Swarthmore 'palette' consists of a fairly small range of earthy tones: beiges, browns, reds and tans for the main surfaces, with deeper, bolder colors for awnings and signage. These should be complemented in new construction, an easy task if using materials similar to those already found. Keep in mind that white and black can look stark when viewed next to warmer tones, particularly when used over large surfaces. They also appear dirty more easily than other colors. Historic color palettes are not necessary.





Decorative elements: New construction should reflect the overall dimensions and horizontal or vertical elements, but not mimic the exact details. For example, cornices and storefronts cornice should be design features; however, they should not be pent roofs or repetitions of other cornices on the street. Windows and doors should have solid trim work constructed of either wood, brick or stucco. Addition of materials and veneers not typically found throughout the town center, such as marble, mirror, high gloss metallic surfaces, etc., should be avoided.

Choice of Doors and Windows: Doors and windows should both be simple in design and avoid historic themes. Solid wood doors are recommended with glass and wood panels reflecting an overall style. Solid wood with no or little window area is not recommended for commercial entrances.

New Storefronts

Contemporary storefronts should try to incorporate elements that relate the storefront to the surrounding buildings, while not imitating exact elements.

- A storefront cornice is encouraged.
- Divide display windows into several panes, including transoms above windows and doors.
- Bulkheads should be of similar material to the building, but differ slightly in character.
- High gloss metallic finishes are discouraged. Metallic surfaces can be anodized or painted.

Discouraged:

- Pent roofs, though commonly seen throughout the district, are not encouraged on new storefronts.
- Franchise architecture
- Pseudo-historic themes, doors, windows, etc.
- Addition of materials and veneers not typically found throughout the town center, such as marble, mirror, high gloss metallic surfaces, etc.



This contemporary brick storefront in Annapolis, Maryland, has a lot of visual interest while relating to surrounding buildings with its large display windows, horizontal and vertical design elements and dark colored trim.



Swarthmore Styles:





Tudor Style

The steeply pitched roof, cross gables and decorative half timbering most easily identify the Tudor style. Both brick and stucco are used for the infill material, while wood trim is used for the decorative half timbers, door surrounds and some window trim. Some windows have a decorative brickwork pattern surrounding the original windows, many of which are still intact. The traditional storefronts have recessed entrances with large display windows lined by simple rectangular transoms that many retailers have taken great advantage of with creative displays and signage. The storefronts are constructed of both wood and metal, but all are painted a dark brown color, closely matching the wood timbers and giving continuity to the block.



The former Michael's Pharmacy at the corner of Chester Road and Park Avenue

Storefront Additions

Swarthmore has several storefronts that were built on to the front of existing residences at some point in the past. In most cases, the residence still peeks out and is visible from the street. The additions themselves do not fall into one category or style, but maintain the two-story, live-work arrangement that contributes to the vitality of a commercial district throughout the day. They are most often constructed of brick with modest architectural detailing.



Storefront Alterations

While every building is altered to some extent, some facades have evolved so far over the years that their original traditional storefronts are hardly recognizable. For these buildings, the façade grants provide a special opportunity for renovation and restoration in the spirit of the traditional façade.



413 Dartmouth Avenue: Courtesy of Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore





333 Dartmouth Avenue

This modest two story commercial building more closely represents the “traditional” main street building in more urban areas, than most other buildings in Swarthmore. The building is constructed of brick; there are hoods and sills surrounding the windows and a wood cornice.



