

Design Guidelines for Buildings in Decorah's Commercial District

Important Notes: These guidelines were written by the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission (DHPC) to illustrate Chapter 15.04 (Design Criteria) of the city's code of ordinances. Chapter 15 establishes minimum standards for the design of construction projects within Decorah's C-3 commercial zoning district. While the guidelines strive to simplify and illustrate the ordinance standards, they should not be considered a substitute. Building owners and contractors must use the regulations in Chapter 15 as the ultimate authority during construction design. Our guidelines have been organized to mirror relevant portions of Chapter 15 for easy comparison.

In 2017, part of Decorah's C-3 zoning district was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and was designated the *Decorah Historic Commercial District*. These guidelines suggest ways buildings within that district may be rehabilitated so the work both complies with city ordinances and also preserves building elements that contribute to the character of Decorah's historic downtown. The city's standards and DHPC guidelines apply to both rehabilitation of existing buildings and new construction.

Historic Overview: Decorah is a town of just over 8,000 residents in northeast Iowa. It was built on a terrace slightly above the bank of the Upper Iowa River after members of the Ho-chunk tribe were forced from the region in 1846. Founders were attracted to the area by its picturesque terrain and abundant resources. The river and many springs provided water for residents and power for mills and other businesses. Decorah became the seat of Winneshiek County in 1851, and the site of Luther College in 1861. Both events contributed to Decorah's establishment as the region's commercial and cultural center.



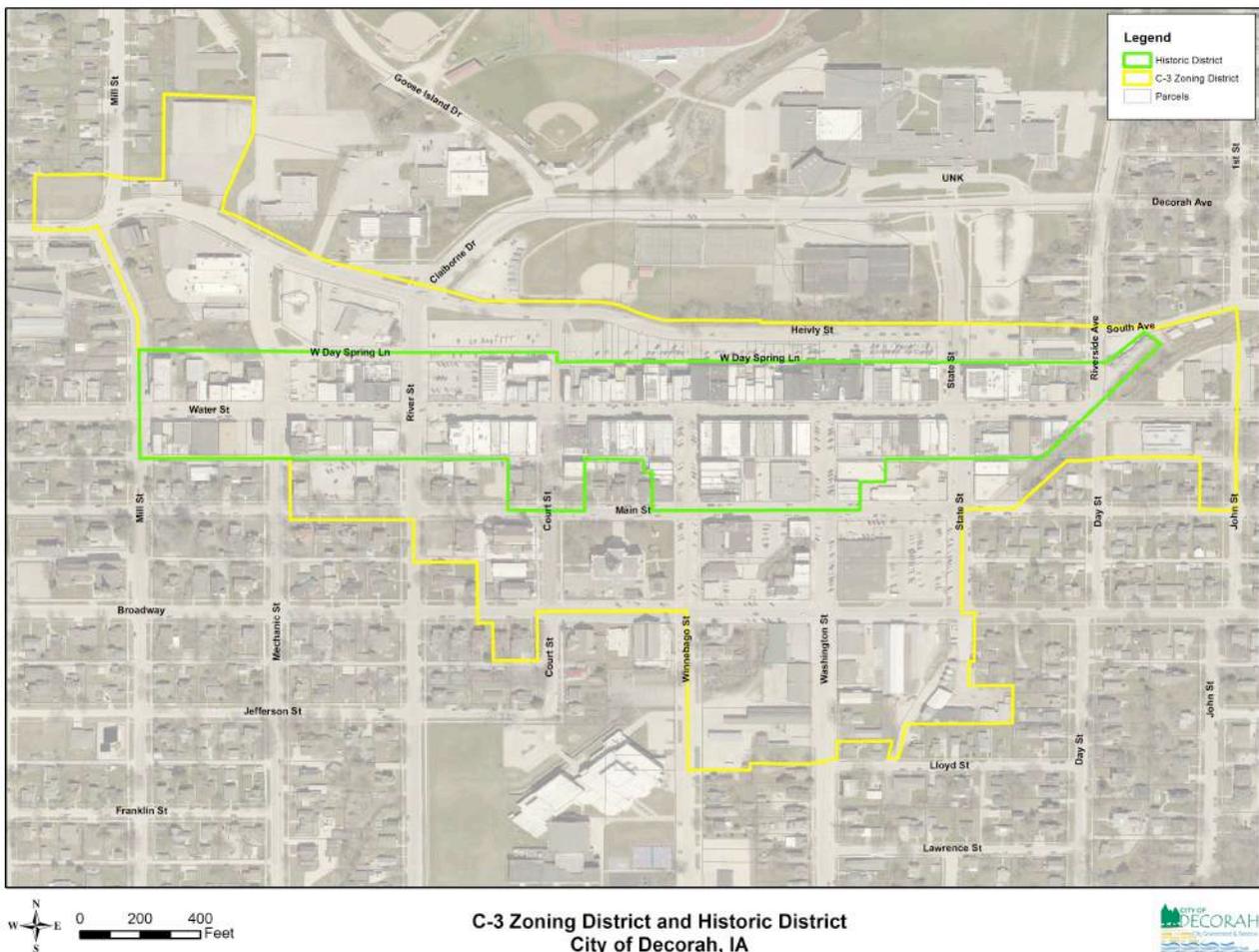
Buildings of various architectural styles line Water Street about 1949.

Decorah's business district is located at the city's heart, mostly along its main street, Water Street. The first store was built at the intersection of Water and Washington Streets; from there the core commercial district grew west along Water Street. The arrival of the railroad and construction of a new passenger depot in 1888 encouraged eastward development. The construction of Courthouse Square, one block south of Water Street, prompted southward growth along Winnebago Street. The Upper Iowa River and steep limestone bluffs to the north limited expansion in that direction.

City streets were first paved with brick in the early 1900s. The arrival of automobiles soon afterwards meant the gradual disappearance of blacksmith and wagon businesses downtown and ushered in an era of gas stations and car dealerships among other businesses along Water Street. Most of the downtown streets were first paved with concrete in 1947. Today, the modern business district offers a wide variety of retail stores, restaurants, coffee shops, and professional services for residents and visitors.

Decorah Commercial Historic District: The Decorah Commercial Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2017. It covers portions of eleven city blocks running east-west from Riverside to Mill Streets; and north-south from Water to Main Streets (see green area of map below, the larger C-3 district is in yellow). It includes 128 buildings and the remaining brick pavement on Court Street. The majority (60%) of buildings date before 1899; only 12% are less than 50 years old. The rest date between 1900 and 1960. Of the 128 buildings, 88 were deemed “contributing,” that is they retain enough of their original architecture to enhance the historic district.

Brick is the major building material in the district, although a small number of wood frame stores and one very early stone store building still stand. Some brick for downtown buildings was sourced locally, and many buildings have foundations of local stone. In some cases, stucco was used to cover both these stone foundations and brick building walls, in a sometimes counter-productive effort to protect the masonry. Most downtown buildings have two stories. The handful of three-story buildings generally represent the oldest structures in the historic district. Decorah’s downtown buildings display a wide variety of architectural styles. For more information about the district see the city DHPC website (www.decorahia.org/historic-preservation).



Guidelines to Accompany Decorah Chapter 15.04 Ordinances “Design Criteria”

15.04.010: Purpose and Intent

Chapter 15.04 establishes minimum standards for the design of construction projects in the C-3 business district, which includes the Decorah Commercial Historic District. These standards apply to rehabilitation of both historic and modern buildings, and to new construction.

Recommended:

- Design projects and choose materials to be long-lasting and to harmonize with those already in the downtown.
- Identify, preserve and maintain a building’s historic materials and architectural features as much as possible (see photos below).
- Consider a building’s features and the character of the downtown when rehabilitating front facades or designing rear entrances and utility areas.
- Design adequate lighting for a building using fixtures that complement it and the downtown.

Not recommended:

- Plain facades or long, monotonous facades.
- Rooflines that do not complement those of adjoining buildings.
- Designs that impede pedestrian or vehicle traffic in downtown.



Left: Preserved parapet of brick building facade.

Right: This building’s elaborate cornice and prominent building date and name were preserved.



Left, *BEFORE* photo: A building whose brick facade was covered with a masonry-type material in the past. This may have been done to modernize its appearance or to attempt to protect the brick.

Right, *AFTER* photo: The same building after rehabilitation. The original brick facade and architectural features have been restored.

15.04.020 - Definitions.

See the following and also refer to the drawing below illustrating commonly mentioned parts of a building. The City of Decorah's additional definitions of "demolition," "minor alteration," "owner of record," and "renovation" may be found in section 15.04.020 of the City Ordinances.

Alteration: Any act or process which changes the exterior appearance of a structure, site or area including, but not limited to, the erection, construction, reconstruction, restoration, removal or demolition of any structure or part thereof, excavation or the addition of an improvement, and including window and door replacements, and visible elevation painting of murals and signage on existing facades.

Bulkhead: Part of a storefront that forms a base for one or more display windows.

Character of a building: All the visible physical features that make up a building's appearance. Character-defining elements include overall shape of a building, its materials, craftsmanship, decorative details, interior spaces and features, as well as aspects of its site and environment.

Character of an historic district: The "personality" of a district or neighborhood, determined by such things as site, land use, building architecture, streetscape design, property maintenance, and traffic.

Cornice: A horizontal molded projection that completes the top of a wall, facade, building, or storefront.

Display window: The large glazed portion of the storefront, and the associated framing, above the bulkhead and below the transom, extending from pier to pier. The display window is typically used for the display of goods and to provide daylight and visibility into the commercial space.

Entrance recess: A recessed opening in the facade leading to the doorway of a storefront or building entrance.

Exterior Features: The architectural style and general design and arrangement of the exterior of a structure, including, but not limited to, the kind and texture of the building material(s), and the type, style and arrangement of all windows, doors, light fixtures, signs and other appurtenant elements, or the natural features of a structure. In the case of outdoor advertising signs, "exterior feature" includes the style, material, size and location of the sign.

Facade. An entire exterior face of a building.

Historic fabric: A building's original or significant historic façade construction material or ornament, or fragments thereof.

Improvement: Any building, structure, parking facility, fence, gate, wall, work of art or other object constituting a physical betterment of real property, or part of such betterment.

Lintel: The horizontal member or element above a door or window opening.

Maintenance: Means and refers to those routine repairs, up-keep, replacements, and other similar tasks, and maintenance of the premises, including but not limited to, the fixtures in such manner as to keep the premises in good and sanitary order, condition, and repair, including tuck pointing.



Parapet: A low wall, located at the top of the facade of a building extending above the roofline.

Pier: A vertical supporting member or element (usually of brick, stone, or metal) placed at intervals along a wall, which typically separates each storefront opening from the adjacent storefront opening.

Rehabilitation: Returning a property to a useful condition -- through repair or alteration -- while preserving those portions and features of the property which are significant to its historic, architectural, and cultural values.

Signage: Any lettering or logos in general, used to advertise a store, goods, or services.

Sign band: The flat, horizontal area on the facade, usually located immediately above the storefront and below the second story windowsill, where signs were historically attached. A sign band may also occur within a decorative band course above a storefront.

Significant architectural feature: An exterior architectural component of a building that contributes to its special historic, cultural, and aesthetic character, or reinforces the special characteristics for which the Decorah Commercial Historic District was designated.

Sill: The bottom horizontal member or element of a window or door.

Soffit: The underside of a structural component such as a beam, arch, or recessed area.

Spandrel area: The portion of the facade below the sill of an upper story window and above the lintel of the window or display window directly below it or above the lintel of a window or display window and the building cornice or top of building.

Transom: A window above a door or display window, separated from the door or display window by a transom bar. A transom can be fixed or hinged.

15.04.030 -15.04.040 - Permit requirements. Permits must be submitted for all planned construction in the C-3 district. (See ordinance language for details on permit requirements.)

Note that new signs require separate permits. (See ordinance sections 17.16.110, 17.16.120, 17.16.130, 17.96.030, and the city's *Sign Guidelines Handbook* for regulations and guidance on sign design.)

Applicants should use the zoning administrator's "Permit Checklist" to be sure a permit application is complete. (See ordinance language for details on issuance of a permit.)

15.05.050 - Standards for review. The design process should take into account the historic appearance and uses of a building. Contact the DHPC to learn as much as possible about when and why a building was constructed, its architectural style and any unique or distinctive materials and features. Design review by the city will take into consideration a proposed project's scale and appearance in relation to the buildings around it. See ordinance language for standards. DHPC's guidelines are listed below for each section of the standards.

Before planning a project and seeking a permit, building owners should consult with the zoning administrator and the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission. DHPC may have access to historic photos or information that could influence a project design.

With regard to historic buildings, the preferred ways to work on them are, in order of preference:

1. To retain, preserve, & repair historic features of a building;
2. To reconstruct such features according to available documentation;
3. To alter such features or add to a building to meet changing uses, while still retaining and reflecting the building's historic character.



Above: Example of building rehabilitation (on far right) using siding that's incompatible with neighboring historic buildings.

Below: Example of new construction in brick.



Above: Preserve transom windows to allow more light into store and to retain historic character.

Below: New construction featuring distinctive architectural details.



15.05.050 - Standards for review (continued)

A. MATERIALS

When rehabilitating a building or facade:

1. Preserve and restore existing historic materials (such as brick or stone), rather than covering them.
2. Use materials compatible with existing and neighboring historic buildings in color, texture and finish (see photo above, left).
3. Avoid aluminum siding, roofing materials, corrugated metal and barn wood on facades (see complete list of prohibited materials in ordinance).
4. Avoid trying to mimic traditional materials (e.g., fiberglass panels molded to look like brick).

For new construction:

1. Select traditional materials (brick, stone, stucco or in some cases, wood) as primary exterior materials(see photo, left).
2. Design the structure so its appearance is compatible with neighboring buildings.

B. DETAILING

When rehabilitating a building or facade:

1. Preserve and if possible restore architectural details of cornices, transoms, display windows, brickwork and similar elements, based on historic photos or drawings (see photo, left).

For new construction:

1. Include a level of design and architectural detail (on windows, cornices and other building parts) that harmonize with surrounding buildings (see photo, lower left).

C. ROOFS AND PARAPETS

For new construction:

1. Design flat roofs (slightly sloped to drain) with parapets that are embellished with detailing to compliment those of adjacent buildings.

D. FACADES

For building rehabilitations:

1. Street level facades on both the front and rear should complement the character of the whole building (see photo and drawing, right).
2. Special care should be taken to retain historic windows -- or to design windows that retain the historic window openings -- that are compatible with the building's facade and the historic downtown in general (see photos, right below).
3. See guidelines regarding material choices above.

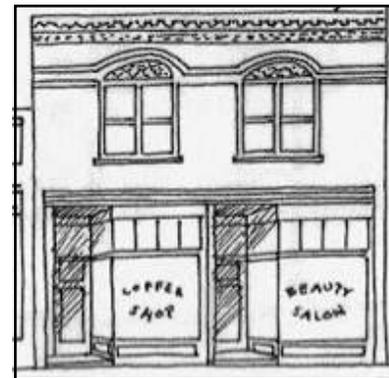
For new construction:

1. Avoid plain facades by dividing a building more than forty-five feet in width or length by varying roof lines, using window bays or by other means (see ordinances for complete list).
2. Set street-level main entrance doors back a minimum of thirty-six inches from the building face.
3. Entrance doors shall be commercial, fully glazed doors, and should harmonize with the building's overall character.
4. Design street side balconies to reflect the design and characteristics of the building and meet all safety requirements.
5. See guidelines on architectural detailing for new construction above.



Above: This facade has two storefronts -- an original storefront on the right and one undergoing alterations on the left.

Below: To maintain the character of the building, rehabilitate the storefront on left using similar features and proportions as its neighbor, as suggested in this drawing.



Recommended: Retain rather than fill in historic window openings. Left: Original window opening. Right: Filled in window opening.





Above and Below: Well-positioned awnings can be both attractive and functional.



Left: Large window signs block customers' view into a store and are not recommended.

Below: Screen trash receptacles and utility areas behind buildings with quality fencing or with materials similar to those of the primary building.



Left: Colors that harmonize with nearby buildings and the character of the downtown are recommended.

E. AWNINGS/ CANOPIES/ SIGNS

For both rehabilitation projects and new construction:

1. Retractable or operable awnings of a durable, water-repellent material are encouraged.
2. Consider the character of neighboring buildings and signage when constructing awnings (see photos, left).
3. Permanent window signs should cover a minimal area (see photo, left, below).

F. UTILITY AREAS AND MECHANICAL EQUIPMENT

For both rehabilitation projects and new construction:

1. All exterior trash and storage areas, service yards, loading areas, and air conditioning units must be screened from view or made as inconspicuous as possible.
2. Use the same materials, color, etc. of the primary building to screen the above named areas so that they are architecturally compatible with the building (see photos, left. Photo of brick screen courtesy of the city of Boise, ID).

G. COLOR

For both rehabilitation projects and new construction:

1. Select a building color that harmonizes with other C-3 structures and maintains the unique historic quality of the downtown (see photo, left).
2. Avoid painting permanent materials like brick, stone, and metal.
3. Because wall murals are considered building alterations, they must be reviewed by city officials.

H. REAR ENTRANCES

For both rehabilitation projects and new construction:

1. The rear entrance should be clean and well maintained and should complement the character of the whole rear elevation (see photo, right).
2. Rear entrances should mimic the design criteria for the front as much as is practical and reasonable and use the same primary materials where possible.



Recommended: Clean, well-maintained rear entrances to businesses. Ideally, this entrance would also mimic the front facade.

I. EXTERIOR LIGHTING

For both rehabilitation projects and new construction:

1. Exterior lighting fixtures should complement the facade's architecture (see photo, right).
2. Avoid placing fixtures so they cover or detract from the facade's architectural details (see photo, right).
3. Bare bulbs are not acceptable (holiday and special event lighting excluded).



Above: Exterior lighting fixtures that complement the architecture of the facade and do not block any architectural details are recommended.

J. SITE APPURTENANCES (BENCHES, TABLES, FENCES, FLAGPOLES, LANDSCAPING, ETC.)

For both rehabilitation projects and new construction:

1. Select appurtenances to complement the building and the historic, pedestrian-friendly downtown.
2. When placing appurtenances, consider pedestrian and vehicle safety and accessibility.
3. Screen satellite dishes and communication/television cables and antennae wires from main street view.