

## Design Guidelines for Commercial Buildings

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*The goal of these guidelines is to give the property or business owner a better understanding of appropriate rehabilitation or new construction to commercial buildings in historic districts. These guidelines are used by the Detroit Historic District Commission in conjunction with “The Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation” to review proposed alterations or new construction in locally designated historic districts containing commercial properties. Each application is considered and reviewed on a case-by-case basis. The Detroit Historic District Commission may allow exceptions to the stated guidelines if the Commission views such exceptions to be beneficial to the overall appropriateness of a proposal.*

### History

The City of Detroit was and is an industrial city. The development of Detroit is traced back to the fur trade industry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A fire in 1805 destroyed the pioneer settlement of log cabins and wood frame structures, which led the way for the creation of a new city. After the fire, Augustus B. Woodward created a street system influenced by L’Enfant’s street plan of Washington, DC. The street system involved four major access roads with secondary roads that would take the form of a hexagon that could be added to continually as the city expanded. Only a small portion of the plan was carried out because of the resilience of private landowners.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century attention turned to the production of lumber iron and steel and warehouses and factories popped up along the waterfront. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Detroit became the 4<sup>th</sup> largest city in the country partly because of the invention of the automobile. Larger commercial buildings in the Detroit area began to appear between 1886 and 1941. At the turn of the century, one and two-story wood frame buildings were often demolished to make room for modern “sky scrapers,” steel frame in construction with terra cotta, brick or stone facades. These new buildings reached heights of 8 stories tall. After World War II buildings reached heights of 20 to 30 stories. The new buildings attracted shoppers and businesses to the downtown area. Architects such as Smith, Hinchman and Grylls, Albert Kahn, Gordon W. Lloyd, Saarinen & Associates and Minoru Yamaski all influenced the Detroit skyline you see today.



Detroit circa. 1900

# Guidelines for Alterations and Rehabilitation Work

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A **commercial building** is defined as a roofed and walled structure built for permanent use and is occupied with or engaged in commerce. It may have a combination of retail, office and residential uses on several floors.

The most popular building forms found in the city are *One-part Commercial Block*, *Two-part Commercial Block*, *Stacked Vertical Block* and *Two and Three-part Vertical Block*.

## One-part Commercial Block



19332 Livernois

The **One-part Commercial Block** consists of an attached or freestanding one-story structure with a simple box or rectangular plan and a highly decorated facade.

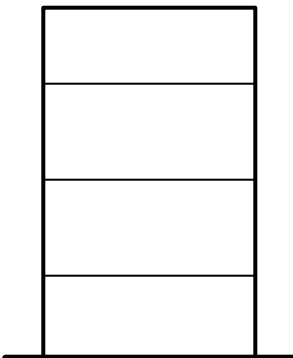
## Two-part Commercial Block



1416-1422 Michigan

The **Two-part Commercial Block** refers to buildings of two to four stories. The façade is often separated into a commercial use on the first floor and office or residential use on the upper floors. The first floor is designed to be inviting with large picture windows and doors to display what the store has to offer. The upper floors are often not as decorative and feature less detailing as they are used for offices or residences and are generally not open to the public.

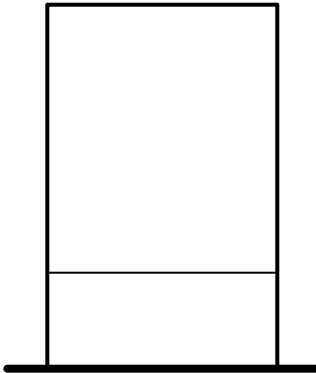
## Stacked Vertical Block



Book-Cadillac Hotel

The **Stacked Vertical Block** refers to buildings with 5 or more floors with at least three individual divisions in design, more ornate and highly decorative on the first floor and simpler design.

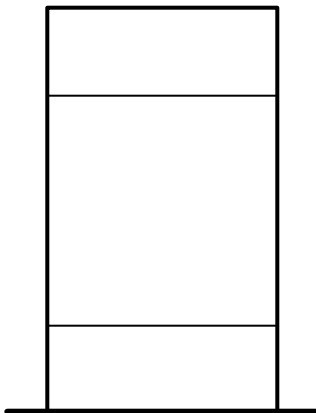
### Two-part Vertical Block



1234 Randolph

The **Two-part Vertical Block** is similar to the two-part commercial block in that it has two distinct zones and is typically a minimum of four stories in height. The bottom portion can be one or two stories but the rest of the floors take on a uniform appearance. The upper portion often receives more attention to detail unlike the two-part commercial block where the upper floors are typically not emphasized.

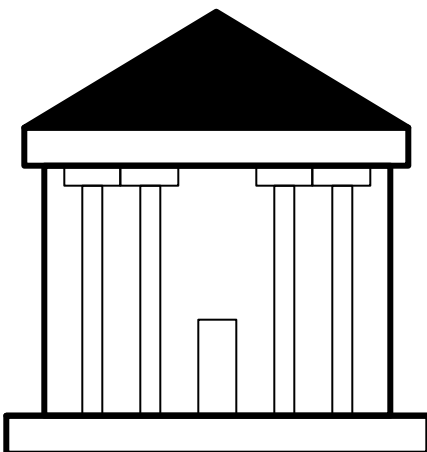
### Three-part Vertical Block



719 Griswold

The **Three-part Vertical Block or Tripartite Construction** is similar to the two-part vertical block but with the addition of one more zone. The lowest zone with its own design, the next few ascending floors with a symmetrical design pattern and the uppermost area having its own design but with more or less detail than the middle section.

### Temple Front



5705 W. Fort

The **Temple Front** style is two or three stories tall with a Greek or Roman feel, sometimes modeled after a specific Greek temple. Two types were found. The **prostyle** would contain a portico of four or more columns extending across the façade. The **distyle in antis** had a recessed entrance fronted by twin columns set between sections of enframing walls. The buildings were not just used for commercial use but for libraries, museums, banks, religious buildings, and shopping arcades.

## Elements of a Storefront



**Storefronts:** *a store is usually located on the first floor of a building with large windows displaying good the store is selling*



The original storefront shall be retained. Window and door design and height shall be repaired or replicated matching the original. If the building has been altered in such a way that the original features and configurations are lost, historic photographs should be consulted. If photographs are not available the new storefront should be in keeping with other storefronts in the area, in size, shape, style, and it must be compatible with its own building design.

This two-story, two-part commercial block shown below has been entirely covered with vinyl siding. This is an example of what **NOT** to do. The original materials may remain/be present under the siding.



**Material:** *the substance in which the building is constructed or covered in.*

Any repairs should be undertaken with original materials or those that match the original as closely as possible.

**Windows:** *any opening in a wall for the admission of light and can be opened or closed.*

Window openings should not be filled in, reduced, or enlarged on the façade and street elevations. Replacements should match the original materials, size, shape, and pane configuration.



Keep windows open



Do **NOT** block windows up

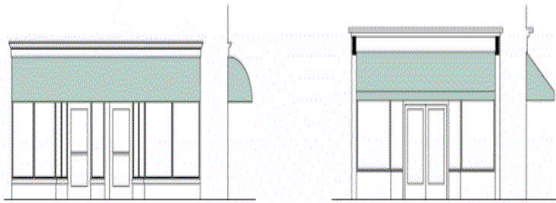
**Signs:** within the district require a Certificate of Appropriateness and should serve primarily for identification purposes. The size and shape should be compatible with the architecture of the building it is attached to. Signs should be placed in historic sign locations. Signs may lay flat on the façade and should not destroy or cover any architectural details. Property addresses should be clearly displayed either on the sign or on the building itself. Temporary signs shall be approved for a specified amount of time.

**Lighting** Back lighting of signs is not appropriate. Neon signs should be located on the interior of the windows only.

**Handicap Accessibility** Historic properties are not exempt from, The American's with Disabilities Act of 1990, ADA, but the law does recognize the national interest in preserving historic properties. The law requires that all-new, public and commercial buildings and facilities be accessible to people with disabilities. If existing elements, spaces or common areas are altered they shall be made readily accessible and that all barriers in existing buildings and facilities be removed on an ongoing basis when it is readily achievable to do so. Wheelchair ramps should be located at a secondary entrance or designed to have the least visual effect on the building and or setting. Ramps can be integrated with existing stairs without a major impact. Materials used for ramps should be compatible with existing material on the building. Please consult National Park Service Preservation Brief # 32 for more information. [www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/briefs/brief32.htm](http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/briefs/brief32.htm)

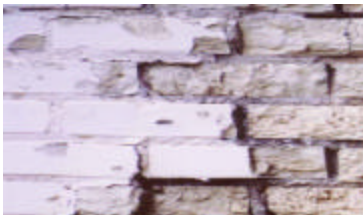
**Canopies or Awnings:** *a roof-like structure attached to a building above windows and doors, projecting over the sidewalk often providing cover.*

Any canopy added to the façade or side of the structure shall be appropriate to the time period and style of the building and be constructed of similar materials. Glass, metal or aluminum awnings shall NOT be used unless it is in accord with the time period. The canopy shall not change the size of the building, nor cover or destroy any distinctive architectural features of the main façade. The Commission encourages the use of self-supporting awnings/canopies.



**Masonry Cleaning:** *Methods to clean masonry such as brick, stone, concrete and tile.*

All cleaning should be done with care and use the “gentlest means” possible. Sandblasting is NEVER recommended. [Refer to masonry cleaning guidelines](#)



Lack of maintenance, improper cleaning and improper repair work can cause deterioration of brick and mortar joints.

**Painting:** *coloring or coating of a surface.* Paint colors should reflect the historical age and style of the building and show the best features of the design. [Refer to Paint Guidelines](#)

**Utility system installation:** *air conditioning units, cooling systems, heaters.* Mechanical systems should be inconspicuously placed on roofs or sides/rears of buildings, not visually obvious.

**Walls & Fences:** *Any living natural planting or man-made structure not integral to any building, used as a barrier to define boundaries, screen off or enclose a portion of the land surrounding a building.* Fencing used to create outdoor commercial spaces, such as for dining, shall be removable and shall be a style, height, material, color, and in a location that is compatible with the historic building and district.

**Parking**: consult and adhere to zoning ordinance. Rear parking is strongly encouraged unless new construction does not allow for it. Decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis.

**Demolition**: *the act of tearing down or raising a structure.*

Demolition should be a last resort. Demolition should only occur if the owner or the City of Detroit Department of Buildings and Safety and Engineering can demonstrate to the commission that the building can not be reused or is structurally unsound.

## New Construction/Additions:

New construction should not attempt to imitate the old, but should be compatible with respect to the following:

**Materials**: type, color, texture and scale should match the surrounding area.

**Scale/Massing**: relationship of the buildings parts to each other and to the surrounding buildings.

**Form, Fenestration**: Rhythm, placement of windows and doors should be compatible with the surrounding area.

**Detailing**: architectural elements such as cornices, lintels, sills, storefronts and masonry patterns should be compatible with the surrounding area.

**Height/Size**: refer to Elements of Design (in relation to surrounding/adjacent buildings).

**Setback**: the distance between the property lines and building walls and the relation to surrounding structures should match surrounding area.

**Landscaping**: Shall be consistent with the landscaping in the district.

**Parking Location/ Site Planning**: Parking should be preferably behind buildings where buildings come to the sidewalk.

Depending on the location, type and use of new construction, there are two designs. Traditionally and most preferred in commercial and historic districts, buildings were built along the street with parking on the street or in a rear parking lot. The modern commercial buildings offer parking lots in front of their building and the actual store is at the rear of the lot. While the second style has been accepted in some districts the traditional style is preferred.

2962-70 Woodward, located at the corner of Woodward and Watson is an example of the traditional method. The building's façade is only separated from the street by a sidewalk and is flush with existing adjacent buildings. Parking for this building and others is available in back of the building



and is accessible from Watson. The building also relates in width, height and construction materials. Surrounding buildings are generally 1 to 2 stories in height and two to four bays wide. This new construction is two-stories tall and five bays wide. Although the building doesn't have a traditional storefront because of its intended use, it does have a series of picture windows along the first floor and an inset door for the main entrance. A symmetrical pattern of double hung windows is located on the second floor. The building uses two of the prominent materials in the district, brick and stone. The building has a brick veneer with stone sills, lintels and a decorative nameplate above the main entrance. By looking at the building you can see that it is new construction, it doesn't exactly mimic the style of adjacent buildings but is simple and plain enough that is compatible to the district.



Parking in back of the building

This example of new construction along West Vernor shows how a new store can adhere to setbacks while blending in with the surrounding commercial buildings. The example below is of brick and masonry construction that is commonly found along W. Vernor and gives the appearance of a two-story building. The building has a flat roof with a slight stepped parapet gable roof. The façade has a symmetrical appearance. The building is on a corner lot with stores on the façade and side elevations. A wall surrounding the property at the sidewalk provides a wall of continuity with the rest of the buildings along the street while at the same time screening the parking area.





**Additions / Rooftop Additions:** Additions should follow all the criteria listed above and throughout these guidelines but should also pay particular attention to the following

- ? Additions shall not destroy or remove historic material of the original building.
- ? The addition should also be “reversible” if for some reason the addition was to be removed in the future, would not destroy the integrity of the building.
- ? The addition should not overwhelm the original building taking away from its historic character or integrity.
- ? New additions should also be “new”, not an exact replica of the original but sympathetic to the design and noticeably an addition.
- ? Rooftop additions must be setback from the front of the building wall.