

Georgia Historic Downtown Streetscape Guidelines

Introduction

Georgia's historic downtowns have been and remain the heart of their communities. The historic buildings and their surroundings remain as physical evidence of the past. Just by being within the historic downtown area, one can experience a sense of the past. There is a growing awareness of the significant role this core area plays in a town's economic vitality and livability. Many opportunities exist to inject new life and energy into this unique part of a city. One of the ways to improve the historic core is to make the downtown more pedestrian friendly.

Historic Downtown's Character

The character of a street or an area is much like the character of a person. The street and its building facades are the "face" presented to the public. Like the face of a person, it can be friendly or hostile; it can be welcoming or harsh. The character of the street and the building facades along it thus exert a strong influence over the atmosphere of the pedestrian environment making people feel either welcome or unwanted. One of the reasons often stated why people enjoy historic downtowns is that they appreciate its "character." The doorways and windows that allow the pedestrian to look into the buildings, the warmth of red brick, and the articulation of the architecture all combine to create a friendly and inviting atmosphere. Maintaining and enhancing this character is an important aspect for any historic downtown improvement.

Historic Downtown's Scale

The architectural scale and proportions of the facade design, the buildings overall height, the vertical, and the horizontal dimensions are scaled to human proportions. The texture of the buildings and the size of the building materials give the pedestrian clues about size and help create a "human" scale in historic downtowns. Some of the details found on historic structures have special detailing such as cast iron columns or decorative brick patterns that add interest and approachability for the pedestrian. Vertical windows, detailed cornices, and historic storefronts are other details that also add to the character and human scale of Georgia's historic downtowns.

Considerations for Developing a Successful Project

The purpose of these guidelines is to direct streetscape design in a consistent pattern that unifies the historic downtown so that it might support and enhance the historic character and human scale of the area. This document is intended to assist in creating a center for the community that reflects its historic past, while still being responsive to modern day needs. The guidelines should encourage the direction of the design toward historical precedents whenever possible and practical. The use of these guidelines will hopefully result in more cost effective plans that utilize quality materials that are durable, easy to maintain, and related to a historic downtown's character. Allow the town's own character to show through by maintaining and retaining historic features and authentic design elements. Keep the design simple. Use contemporary styles for new elements. Try and avoid overly elaborate reproduction styles that might represent a past that never existed.

The Role of Streetscape Improvements

A streetscape project is only one part of any effort to increase downtown activity. The key to the success of any downtown plan is to tailor it to meet the needs of the individual town. The project should be developed and designed to provide a physical representation of the community. This entails an involvement and understanding during the development of the project to keep the historic downtown area from becoming homogenized and resembling every other downtown that has recently completed a streetscape project.

Goals for a Streetscape Improvement

The ultimate goal of every streetscape project should be to improve the safety and physical accessibility of its streets and pedestrian paths. Streetscape projects should take into account the elderly, the very young, the disabled, and those in wheelchairs or pushing strollers while also meeting current safety, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and construction and highway standards. These can be found in the Georgia Department of Transportation's Pedestrian and Streetscape Guide, and should be used when any federal and state transportation funds are involved.

Carefully Analyze the Downtown's Needs

There are two key questions to address at the earliest stages of planning: What is the ultimate goal of this project, and what are the character defining historic qualities of this downtown? These questions are important because many streetscape improvements, such as, curb extensions, alternative paving materials, the introduction of street trees and sidewalk widening, among others, can compromise a downtown's historic character. If done without consideration for the historic fabric of the downtown, these changes can detract from the uniqueness and setting by diminishing the downtown's authenticity and sense of place. Begin your streetscape project by researching how the town evolved. Take the time to observe the historic downtown today. See which historic features remain. Consider what needs to be improved to protect the historic resources of the downtown and make the area more vital.

Guidelines

These guidelines are divided into four major sections:

- ◆ Streets and Sidewalks
- ◆ Lighting
- ◆ Landscaping and Street Furniture
- ◆ Amenities

These sections cover the major components of a streetscape project and include both items that will be included and those that should be considered as a part of the project before the streetscape plan is completed. This listing is by no means comprehensive. This guideline is simply provided as a starting point in the design process.

Streets and Sidewalks

The streets in historic downtowns were originally dirt. As conditions improved, the streets surface was graded, oiled and eventually paved with asphalt or concrete. Sidewalks were and most often still are simply functional. Railroad tracks are often a part of many historic downtowns. The combination of different transportation types, rail, pedestrian and car, should be the major consideration in the development of a streetscape plan. Sidewalks should be wide enough to accommodate new design elements such as street furniture as well as people walking side by side and past others who might be standing, talking, or browsing.

Parking

On street parking is an important element in maintaining the economic vitality of a historic downtown. The redesign of existing on-street parking can be an effective part of the improvements involved in a streetscape project. Street parking also helps shield pedestrians from street traffic. Carefully consider the balance between parking needs and other design improvements during the design of your streetscape project.

Sidewalk Materials

If there is no historic precedent or record of a paving pattern or material in the historic downtown, then concrete, with simple scoring patterns that relate to architectural elements on building facades, is recommended for sidewalks in historic downtowns. Brick or other material may be used for special accent areas, creating a larger scale pattern on the street. If there is a unique style, feature, paving material or pattern in the downtown area, this should be recognized in the new design. The recreation of a previous or current style is not required but the design should reflect the continuity of the downtown streetscape.

Concrete Stamping

The use of concrete stamping to create a pattern or design is worth considering. Aside from the creation of a brick-like effect for accent areas, the introduction of the impressions of leaves or other appropriate elements into the concrete surface might be used. If concrete stamping is used, consideration should be made to ensure that any patterns or pavers do not cause tripping hazards or create excessive vibration for those in wheelchairs.

Street Names in the Pavement

The addition of street names into the pavement surface might be considered for the sidewalks at the intersection corners where pedestrians wait to cross the street. This could include the street name stamped into the concrete or the addition of the street name inset with bronze letters to the concrete surface. This detail helps orient pedestrians and is consistent with the goal of creating a pedestrian friendly environment and strengthening the sense of the historic downtowns character.

Special Features

The installation of bronze medallions such as a city or county seal or other castings such as maps could be considered for a streetscape project. These additions provide a unique and special aspect to a historic downtown streetscape project. The bronze installations should be located out of high traffic areas.

Lighting

Outside of larger cities, most of Georgia's historic downtowns had limited lighting until the twentieth century. The addition of pedestrian-scaled lighting is a fairly recent phenomenon in most downtown areas. Without the proof of historic records or photographs, streetscape lighting should be considered a contemporary addition.

Lighting Fixtures

The lighting fixtures should be compatible with the surrounding district. If there is no evidence that the town had decorative light fixtures, contemporary fixtures that are compatible in scale, design and color are recommended. This is not to say that only starkly modern styles can be used, but simply that streetscape lighting should not try to reflect an earlier period.

Lighting fixtures should be limited to one style and this should be consistent throughout the project and downtown area. Lighting manufacturers usually have a range of sizes and options within any one style to accommodate pedestrian scale lighting, street lighting and more elaborate lighting fixtures for high visibility areas such as street crossings or intersections.

Lighting Placement

Adjacent residential uses should be considered and where possible these lights should be located away from residential units, to avoid light trespass. Consideration should also be made in pedestrian scaled lighting to direct lighting to the pavement area and avoid any shadows from the lighting fixtures.

Landscaping

The majority of landscaping in historic downtowns involves the introduction or replacement of street trees. However, there is also the opportunity to enhance the downtown area by improving or adding boulevard and median strips, as well as, planters either as a part of the streetscape or through the initiative of individual business or property owners. The addition of large scale landscaping should be considered carefully to both enhance the pedestrian environment without negatively impacting traffic flow or visibility.

Planters & Pots

Landscaping in historic downtowns will be further enhanced by the use of seasonal flower displays in planters and pots. These plantings add not only color, but also that special quality of a place that is well cared for and nurtured. Planters and pots can include annual flowers for seasonal display or ground covers, either evergreen or deciduous. The placement of planters and pots should not block other elements such as streets, signs, parking meters or streetlights.

Boulevard & Median Strips

The plantings within these areas help in providing the sense of a welcoming downtown area. Consideration should be taken early in the design phase to consider whether this will be an area maintained by local organizations or if low maintenance plantings should be used to provide a more consistent appearance.

Trees

Trees are significant elements that can unify a commercial street's appearance. Trees also enhance the street's appearance by helping to define the sidewalk, channeling circulation, and serving as a buffer between the sidewalk and the street. Rows of street trees were not usually a part of the street scene during downtowns historic past. However, trees and other decorative plantings are significant because they provide functional, aesthetic and environmental benefits. One of the main functional benefits is the provision of shade to the pedestrian environment. Most people appreciate trees because they provide a sense of protection from the elements and automobiles and because they soften the urban environment. Sidewalk width must be considered when siting street trees to prevent constricting the pedestrian walkway.

Tree Placement

The placement of street trees should be carefully considered since they can hide the significant architectural features of a downtown's historic buildings. Relate placement to the architecture, block patterns, curb cuts, and building entries, adjusting as required. It may be more appropriate to plant trees in front of parking lots or other areas without street-edge building facades. Trees can also be used to soften the appearance of visually distracting non-historic buildings and parking facilities that do not contribute to the character of the district. The seasonal changes provided by street trees offer year round variety to the city. There is also a maintenance element associated with the installation of trees that needs to be considered by both the city and downtown property owners.

Tree Selection

All plant materials should be suited to the climate, soil type, and environment in which they are planted. This is a major concern in areas with high levels of pollution, and automobile and pedestrian damage. The selection of trees for Historic downtowns should be based on their ability to endure these stressful conditions. Trees should be strong, resistant to most diseases and insects (or easily treatable), and require little maintenance. They should be single trunked, upright, produce a minimal amount of fruit and seeds and have a medium to long life expectancy. Branches should not break easily. Trees should be deep rooted to avoid heaving of the sidewalk and/or curb. Trees that have large roots on the surface should not be used. Root restricting rings and pits are not recommended. Plant materials and irrigation techniques that require less water should be considered.

Tree Size

Trees planted in the public right-of-way in historic downtowns should be large enough at the time of planting to add substantial greenery and shade to the street. The height of street trees at maturity should be appropriate to the height of buildings on the street, with consideration given to the fact that these trees will never reach their normal mature height because of their placement in a sidewalk area. Ideally, all the trees on a given street or at least on a given block will be of the same species. Reasonable judgment should be used when pruning young trees to allow for pedestrian safety.

Tree Grates & Wells

Tree grates and tree wells are an attractive way to allow street trees to be planted in a paved environment. They also prevent soil compaction around trees in higher volume pedestrian areas. Other options such as modular blocks or brick pavers may be considered if conditions warrant. Tree grates should be designed to allow for tree trunk growth.

Street Furniture and Amenities

The street as a public right-of-way responds to the needs of the time. Streets that once accommodated horses and railroad cars were quite different than they are today. Existing features such as fountains, clocks, dates and names stamped in concrete, and sidewalk glass block basement vaults should be retained because they contribute to the interest and identity of downtowns. Today, the addition of other street amenities such as benches, trash receptacles, clocks, drinking fountains, and public art are appropriate. While these features are new, they should still relate to the historic theme through color, material, and design. Amenities should be placed in an orderly fashion and should not block the pedestrian path nor should they make maintenance difficult.

Seating

Benches should be placed to respond to adjacent land uses and transit stops. Benches will most likely be used in front of hotels and office buildings, at bus stops, and in public spaces.

Sidewalk Cafes

Sidewalk cafes should be considered for historic downtowns. They allow patrons to enjoy people watching, the interesting buildings, and the fine weather. The seating area should be well defined and easy to maintain. Seating areas for cafes should not block the free flow of pedestrians.

Trash Receptacles

The trash receptacles should be the same style and color as the benches and other street amenities. One of the most efficient placements of trash receptacles is on each diagonal corners near the intersection where they can be used by the largest number of pedestrians.

Bicycle Parking

Bicycle racks encourage visitors to arrive by bicycle and stop in historic downtowns, rather than traveling on through. They should be installed firmly attached to the sidewalk. They should be placed as to prevent any attached bicycles from blocking pedestrian passage.

Parking Lot Screening

Owners of parking lots might consider installing railings, hedges, brick piers or other design elements along the perimeter of their lots. These help in screening the parked cars from pedestrians and enhance the downtown streetscape.

Banners & Signage

The creation of a unified look for the downtown area can be further assisted through the use of decorative banners and consistent directional signage. The installation of banners should be considered when selecting the lighting for downtown. Directional signage will need to be coordinated with the respective local and state authorities.

District Gateway Signs

Gateway signs define the edge of a historic downtown and clearly mark its boundaries for both pedestrians and motorists. If space and funding is available, these should be considered within the context of the overall downtown area and not just for a specific project area.

Business Directories

Directories should be constructed to be easily altered and revised. Rather than being completely reprinted each time a business name changes or relocates in a downtown area. Directories should only be considered for installation in a streetscape project if there is an established active organization such as a Downtown Development Authority, Better Home Town or Main Street program that is able and willing to provide continued maintenance and updating of these directories.

Newspaper Vending Boxes

Newspaper boxes should be placed so that they do not interfere with pedestrian circulation. They should not distract from the historic streetscape and never be attached to the street light fixtures. Where a number of them are needed at a single location, they should be consolidated into a single array of boxes.

Bollards

Bollards (or railings) should only be used where it is necessary to protect pedestrians or special features from automobiles and to indicate to pedestrians that they should exercise caution.

Other Amenities

Some other elements to consider in developing a historic downtown streetscape design include monuments, fountains or water features, clocks and sculpture. If any of these elements are historic to the downtown district they should be maintained in or a close to their original location as possible. The addition of these elements should take into consideration both motorist and pedestrian safety and flow.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, the Georgia Historic Downtown Streetscape Guidelines have provided an introduction to the many different options and elements that need to be considered during the development of a streetscape project. Using these guidelines along with the Georgia Department of Transportation's Pedestrian and Streetscape Guide will provide the necessary information needed to rehabilitate and revitalize historic downtown areas throughout the state.

Acknowledgements

1. Historic downtown Main Streets: Strategies for Compatible Streetscape Design. Oregon Department of Transportation. 2000
2. Kentucky Streetscape Design Guidelines for Historic Commercial Districts. The Kentucky Heritage Council and the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet. 2002
3. Design Guidelines for Lower Downtown Streetscape. Denver Landmark Preservation Commission and Planning and Development Office. City and County of Denver. 1991