

## SECTION 3

# Historic Design Principles



## General Principles of Historic Design

Architectural design guidelines were not needed 100 years ago. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century builders and architects were trained in a wide variety of styles and materials. They understood basic proportions and design rules that fostered harmony with their surroundings and a sense of historic continuity. During the twentieth century, the rise of Modern architecture encouraged architects to express individuality and reject past traditions. A changing economy, speculative building, and manufactured building components led to a decline in craftsmanship and less emphasis on aesthetics.



**The Village of Pittsford is a dense cluster of buildings constructed during the last 200 years. Historic village buildings were constructed with a high level of craftsmanship and durable materials. A balance between architectural variety, consistency in proportion and other basic design principles has produced the village's pleasant historic character and visual harmony.**

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Buildings constructed before 1945 in Pittsford share design principles that give the village its pleasing and harmonious appearance. The *Design Standards* are intended to promote the understanding of these general design principles.

**Scale** is the relative or apparent size of a building or architectural element in relationship to the nearby buildings and its surroundings. The dimensions of a building define its scale. Individual elements, including doors, windows, porches, wings, and roof elements, all influence a building's apparent scale. Scale is one of the most important features determining whether a building is compatible with its setting. A stark contrast of scale between new and existing buildings disrupts the visual harmony of the street and neighborhood.

**Proportion** is the relationship of one element of a building to a connected architectural feature. Usually, proportion refers to a width-to-height ratio of wall planes or smaller elements. Careful attention to proportion is a uniform and harmonious arrangement of architectural elements. Proportion is also an essential element of a pleasing streetscape.

**Rhythm** is the regular recurrence of elements, sometimes alternating with opposite or different elements. On a building facade, windows and door openings are the most obvious indicators of rhythm. Buildings spaced equally apart along a street also establish a rhythm and are complemented by fencing, landscape elements, and the sidewalk. Rhythm is not synonymous with monotony; there is often great visual interest in a rhythmic streetscape.

**Location and Orientation:** Village buildings face the street and visually relate to each other. They do not stand at an arbitrary angle to obtain a better view or to be invisible from the street. The village's residential and commercial neighborhoods are characterized by regular setbacks and spacing that creates a sense of visual unity. There are a few deviations that add to the eclectic nature and may define a certain period of development.



As this aerial view shows, buildings in the village are oriented with their main facade facing the street.

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**Balance:** Some periods and styles of architecture, such as the Federal style, have balance and symmetry as defining characteristics. Even an asymmetrical house or building may obtain balance through the disposition of wings, porches, and landscape elements.

**Massing** defines the shape of a structure, which, in turn, suggests the volume of the building's interior. Historic architecture in the village varies in massing from the simple, rectangular forms of early eighteenth century houses to the complex and varied massing of Queen Anne style residences. Alterations or additions to historic houses historically followed the principle of additive massing: adding smaller ells and wings at the rear or sides, so as not to overwhelm the original part of the house. Additive massing retains the basic scale of the building and its relationship to other buildings on the street.

**Materials:** Historic buildings in the Village of Pittsford were constructed of stone, brick, and wood. Painted wood, particularly for siding and trim, is the most common building material in the village. Instead of creating a monotonous, uniform appearance, however, the use of painted and stained wood siding and trim creates great visual variety. Glass and brick elements play a supporting role in the design of many historic buildings. The character of the commercial sections of the village is enhanced by the use of both brick and frame construction.

### Compatible Versus Incompatible Treatment of Historic Buildings



**Compatible:**  
Maintain and preserve existing façade elements, including trim, window rhythm, details, and architectural features.



**Incompatible:**  
Altering window size, location, or style  
Enclosing an open porch  
Removing architectural details

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### New Construction

New buildings (including outbuildings) in an historic district should complement the existing historic buildings and the established character of the surrounding neighborhood. Poorly designed buildings or additions can result in the loss of visual integrity of the Historic and Architectural Design District. The Village's Preservation Ordinance, and the associated design review process, is intended to preserve the architectural integrity and visual harmony of the village's historic district. Hundreds of cities, towns, and villages across the nation have a similar design review process.

Architectural review in an historic district can be challenging. Boards are criticized for stifling modern architectural design, or, conversely, of allowing "anything goes" and being too lenient. Experience has shown that the most effective architectural design standards are those that guide the design process, rather than regulate it. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, in its booklet, *Reviewing New Construction Projects in Historic Districts*, states that:

Design guidelines for an historic area should not dictate certain styles for new buildings ... Most districts exhibit an evolution of architectural styles and cultural trends, including the 20th Century. Therefore, guidelines that emphasize context and design elements, rather than styles, allow the broadest and most flexible interpretation for new construction.

Pittsford Village contains a variety of architectural styles representing many different historic periods. (Refer to Section 2 for a discussion of these styles). Rather than mandating the copying of one or two "preferred" styles, the Architectural and Preservation Review Board's design review process encourages construction that is identifiable as contemporary, but does not disrupt the continuity and aesthetic value of the historic district.

**Steps to Consider Before You Begin:** Property owners, builders, and architects need to consider a number of design factors before they initiate plans for new construction or make substantial additions to an historic building in the Village of Pittsford:

1. The most important phase of designing new construction or additions in the village begins long before the architect starts to draw the plan. The property owner and architect should take a long, objective look at both the subject property and its surroundings, and consider the following:
  - What is the history of the neighborhood and what physical features define its character?
  - Are different periods of development represented on the property or in the neighborhood?
  - Was the neighborhood historically commercial or residential?
  - Is it located along the canal, or in a downtown setting?
  - What are the periods and styles represented?

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- Is the area architecturally homogenous or diverse?
2. Define the characteristic elements of both the general neighborhood and the immediate environs. Look for such identifying features as building height, scale, setback, site coverage, orientation, spacing between buildings, building rhythm along the street, and such site elements as walls, walks, trees, and fences.

**Design Considerations for New Construction** - Architects and builders should be aware of a few basic principles and design features when designing new construction in the Village. The APRB considers the following criteria when reviewing new construction:

**Height:** New construction should not tower over nearby existing buildings. An exception may be granted for a small architectural feature, such as a turret, tower, or weathervane. The mass and design of such feature should not alter the historic scale of the area. Likewise, a horizontal, ground-hugging building is not appropriate in an area characterized by two- and three-story buildings.

**Scale:** Buildings throughout the village have a "human scale," where door and window openings, story heights, and the dimensions of details are all in proportion to the human body. The scale of new buildings and their features should be in harmony with the scale of the surrounding historic buildings and the neighborhood.

**Width:** Building width, and the width between buildings, are important elements of neighborhood character. Where there is a variety of building widths and spaces between buildings, new construction should stay within this range, rather than establish new limits.

**Orientation:** Most buildings in the village are oriented with the front door and main façade facing the public street. This is also true of houses along the canal. New buildings should incorporate a main door facing the street and connected with a walk to the public sidewalk.

**Setback:** Buildings in the older sections of the village have smaller front and side setbacks than the Postwar village neighborhoods. Most historic commercial buildings have little or no side and front setbacks. Setbacks for new construction should match the character of the surrounding neighborhood.

**Proportion and Rhythm of Openings:** Door and window openings in the village's distinct neighborhoods often share similar size, proportions, spacing, shapes, and solid-to-void ratio. Openings in new construction should be compatible with those of nearby existing buildings. Glass ribbon windows, picture windows, or prominent pseudo-Palladian windows are incompatible with most areas of the village. Commercial storefronts often are characterized by large display windows.

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**Neighborhood Rhythms:** Repeated elements on neighboring buildings are common throughout the village. These include distinct roof eaves detailing, facades crowned with prominent cornices in the South Main business district, porches, or the use of shingle or clapboard siding. New construction should reflect strong neighborhood design characteristics.

**Roof Form:** Roof form, roof pitch, and eave detailing of new construction should relate to what is common in the surrounding neighborhood.

**Massing:** Building mass may vary from the simple, gable-roofed, rectangular forms of Federal style architecture, to the complex massing of Queen Anne and Gothic Revival style houses. New construction should follow the general massing of surrounding buildings. In an area where buildings of varying mass are present, a new variant should not be introduced.

**Horizontal Versus Vertical:** A block consisting of narrow, two- and three-story buildings is primarily vertical, and the architectural elements of a new building should follow the vertical emphasis. Postwar neighborhoods, containing modest Ranch and Cape homes with attached garages, have a more horizontal appearance. New construction should respect the predominant vertical, horizontal, or balanced appearance of its surroundings.

**Materials:** Not all buildings in the village are covered with wood clapboard. Public and commercial buildings, as well as many large residences in the village, have been constructed of brick, stucco, or, more rarely, stone. Typically, vinyl, aluminum, concrete, metal, and stucco applied over foam (EIFS) are not appropriate building materials for new construction in the historic areas of the village. There are a few exceptions. A few historic buildings are built of concrete and a few of the Schoen Place barns were historically sided with metal.

**Landscape Treatment** – Grass lawn is the predominant groundcover in the village. Plantings, whether formal or naturalistic, should complement those of surrounding residences. The construction of extensive paved areas, such as patios, terraces, parking, and multi-car driveways, in place of front lawns, is prohibited by zoning in most districts and should be avoided. Paved areas in front yards should be limited to walks and well-scaled driveways. Paving materials should be in character with surrounding residential properties in the neighborhood.

**Outbuildings** - The construction of outbuildings, such as pool houses, garages, sheds, barns, or other structures, should be compatible with existing buildings on the property. In addition to the design features listed above, new outbuildings generally should adhere to the principle that they are secondary structures and should never overwhelm the main building, or call overt attention to themselves. New outbuildings should be located behind the main building or in a location that does not disrupt historic views or the setting of existing historic buildings.

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### Compatible New Construction



A former non-historic gas station was redesigned and enlarged in a simple style compatible with the neighboring utilitarian mills and barns in the Schoen Place waterfront district.



This dairy store and plant was designed to harmonize with the National Register listed farm on which it is located. The building's form, massing, roof slope, window style, and cupola relate to other structures on the property. The dairy's massing visually conceals the size of the modern plant and ensures the dairy does not visually compete with the historic main house. The building location was carefully selected to preserve historic views and landscape features and to conceal loading docks and other service elements.



This large house employs setbacks, materials, and window proportions similar to neighboring older homes. The garage is discreetly tucked behind the house.



This bank shows how contemporary design can be blended with thoughtful consideration of scale, orientation, proportions and materials to produce a compatible building.

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### Additions

Before designing an addition to an existing historic building, it is necessary to identify and understand the characteristic elements of the building and the neighborhood.

- How old is the building? What changes have already occurred and when?
- What are the building materials, roof forms, textures, type of ornament, and facade elements?
- What is the style of windows, doors, and porches?

The exact replication of historic styles and architectural elements is not required, but additions should relate to the general scale, proportion, rhythm, balance, massing, and materials of the building to which it is attached and the property's surroundings. An addition should not be obtrusive or visually disruptive.

### Design Considerations for Additions

- Large visible additions to existing historic buildings should be compatible with the character of the existing building, and should reflect the era in which it was built; it should not re-create the past, or give a mistaken impression of false antiquity. Additions should not be so large that they change the orientation, general massing, or scale of the original building.
- Locate additions to historic buildings as inconspicuously as possible, usually to the rear or least public side of a building.
- Do not obscure or destroy characteristic features of historic structures when making additions; the loss of any historic material should be minimal.
- Whenever possible, design and construct additions so that basic form and character of the historic building can remain intact if the addition is removed in the future.
- Construct the addition in a manner that is compatible with surrounding historic buildings in size, scale, materials, mass, and roof forms.
- Do not introduce a new architectural style, or too closely mimic the style of the existing building. Additions should be simply and cleanly designed in a compatible, but not imitative, style.
- Adhere to the principle of additive massing, where an addition is secondary to the main mass of the building, rather than a predominant element. Historic buildings often have smaller additions at the rear of buildings, or at the sides. Several small additions can provide as much livable space as one large addition.



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### Compatible Additions



The new fellowship hall of Saint Paul's Lutheran Church matches materials and reinterprets architectural motifs found on the existing building.



The Saint Paul's addition is set back from the two historic buildings it connects so it does not interrupt the rhythm of the street.



The small addition at the east end of the Pittsford Flour Mill houses mechanical equipment and a new entrance. The addition does not obscure any significant architectural features and is consistent with design of the historic building. It is small in relation to the original building. The entrance canopy is the reconstruction of a historic canopy whose appearance was documented by historic photographs.



The wing was added to this Gothic Revival church over 100 years after the original building was built. By matching the exterior material (Medina sandstone) and architectural features, the wing harmonizes with the historic church. An articulated connection with lowered roof distinguishes the addition from the original building.

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### Compatible Additions



**This Foursquare home has been enlarged with a compatible rear wing. A trim board identifies the limit of the original house.**



**This mid nineteenth-century home has a new side wing. The wing matches the window size and other details of the original house. The main block with side wing massing is typical of mid nineteenth-century vernacular homes.**



**The wing added to this early nineteenth-century home matches the window design and spacing, porch details, and roof form of the original house.**



**This ca. 1910 Four-square house was enlarged with a side wing. The wing respects the simple design, roof slope, window style, void-to-solid-ratation and proportions of the original house.**

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### Alterations

Alterations to existing buildings shall either be made consistent with the spirit of their architectural style, or shall alter the structure to an appearance consistent with the architectural styles of historic value existing in the district. Alternatively, contemporary design for alterations and additions to existing properties may be permitted when such alterations and additions do not destroy significant historical, architectural, or cultural material, and such design is compatible with the size, scale, material, and character of the property, neighborhood, or environment. In applying the principles of consistency and compatibility with the architectural styles existing in the district, the APRB shall consider the following factors: composition, design, texture, and other visual qualities. Alteration of an historic structure should be consistent with the design of the original structure and of any later additions that are architecturally significant in their own right. Whenever possible, retention and maintenance of original features are encouraged over restoration and/or removal.

### Compatible Alterations



**This ca. 1915 former garage was altered to accommodate a retail use. The original materials, including site-formed rock-face concrete block, were preserved. New elements, including the sign cornice and new windows, are visually compatible with the scale and period of the building.**



**This ca. 1960 former post office was altered to provide a storefront for the current retail occupant. The design of the new entrance is in scale with the original building and uses elements that relate to the Postwar Colonial Revival style of the original building.**

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### Compatible Alterations



**This handicapped accessible entrance provides access to the Guetersloh House (now church offices) and the Fellowship Hall of First Presbyterian Church. The entrance matches the scale of the house and is located at the rear of the building where it is not a visually prominent feature**



**Blown-in insulation installed in this house caused catastrophic paint failure and deterioration of the exterior clapboard. After the owner investigated remedies with a preservation architect and failed to solve the problem, the owner applied to replace the original wood clapboard with cement fiber clapboard. The application was approved because the owner provided ample documentation investigating other unsuitable solutions and because the proposed material looked visually very similar to the material being replaced.**



**In remodeling this small home, the owner added a new porch and requested to install casement, rather than double-hung, second-floor windows to meet current NYS Building Code egress requirements. Because the new windows carefully match the proportions and muntin pattern of the windows in the rest of the house, the application was approved.**



**To address liturgical changes and provide more seating, Saint Louis Church remodeled the Main Street facade of the building. The church worked with the APRB to develop a solution that would not encroach into the viewshed of adjacent historic buildings and that respected the distinguished modern period design of the church.**

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### Incompatible Alterations



Additions have changed the scale and massing of this early nineteenth-century house. Replacement cladding and windows have made the exterior look flat and have eliminated historic trim details.



The new window added to this house is inappropriate in size, shape, proportion, and materials. Replacement porch components do not match the appearance of the original materials or design.



Everyone wants to “improve” their building. Today, very few contractors, and few architects, understand traditional materials or traditional design principles. The results can be disastrous as in the case above, where a large Colonial Revival home was hidden behind a grand “contemporary” façade. The scale, materials, form, massing and design of this addition are incompatible with the building and the neighborhood.



This early nineteenth-century Federal house has been stripped of its visual character by the installation vinyl siding, removal of the cornice returns, replacement of the original entrance and improperly mounted shutters. Compare the appearance of this house to the similar village of Pittsford house shown at the top of page 13.

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### Demolition

Demolishing an historic building is an irreversible extreme measure. While a few good, well-designed buildings have replaced demolished buildings in the village in the past, other historic buildings were replaced by buildings lacking the character and craftsmanship of the original. For this reason, the APRB usually does not approve applications to demolish contributing historic buildings in the village. The APRB requires the owner to prove *hardship*, or that demolition is the only way for the owner to receive a reasonable return on the property. This standard applies to both the main building on a property, as well as any contributing historic outbuildings, such as garages, carriage houses, and barns, and contributing features, such as walls, gates, and historic fences.

In rare cases, demolition of a building in an historic district may be appropriate. Demolishing a noncontributing building or addition that negatively impacts its property and neighborhood is one such example. Under certain circumstances, non-historic or non-significant components of a building or building complex may be removed. Approval of demolition is determined on a case-by-case basis, but normally, the applicant must provide proof that the building or building component is noncontributing.

In rare situations, demolition may be the only practical remedy because of damage by fire or weather, or economic hardship. In these cases, the APRB must weigh the historic and architectural significance of the building against the argument supporting the proposed demolition. If the request for demolition is based on structural instability, damage, or deterioration, the APRB may require a technical report prepared by an architect or engineer. The report should detail the specific problems and provide cost estimates for their correction. These cost estimates may enter into a decision by the APRB that any rehabilitation would exact an economic hardship on the owner. It should be noted that the Village of Pittsford Preservation Code specifically prohibits “demolition by neglect.” Disregarding proper exterior building maintenance is a self-created hardship, and will not be considered as a justification for demolition.

Demolition usually results in the construction of a new building, and the APRB and the public have the right to know what will be built in its place. Before the APRB will grant approval for demolition, it must first grant approval for plans for a replacement building. If another building is to be moved to this property, the APRB will have to assess its effect on surrounding properties. If new construction is proposed, the APRB will apply the *Standards for New Construction in an Historic District*. If new construction is planned, the property owner should be prepared to provide not only plans and specifications for the new building(s), but a clear indication as to how the building will relate to its surroundings.

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### Relocation

Relocating buildings, particularly houses and barns, has been a common practice through much of the village's history. Today, however, relocating a building either inside or outside of the village should be considered only as a last resort to avoid demolition. Moving a building to a different location on the same property in order to take advantage of a better view or to make room for additional buildings is strongly discouraged.

From a preservation perspective, relocation destroys the context of the building and alters its relationship with the surrounding natural and built environment. Often, relocation destroys character-defining features, such as chimneys, foundations, and porches. Finally, the removal of an historic building may negatively impact its new surroundings. If the building is not compatible in scale, style, and setback with its new surroundings, a whole new set of historic preservation design problems has been introduced.

Before permitting a building to be moved, the APRB will consider the historic and architectural significance of the building, the contribution the building makes to the Historic and Architectural Design District on its existing site, and the impact of its removal on the character of the district. Generally, removal of a building should be considered only under exceptional circumstances. The owner of the subject building should be prepared to justify the necessity for the move, outline what steps he has taken to avoid moving the building, explain the proposed moving process, and provide detailed plans showing the relationship of the moved building to its new site.

The APRB may refuse an owner's request for a move, if, in their opinion, the building is of such architectural or historical significance that its removal would negatively impact either the building or its present site; if the building could be rehabilitated on site without removal; if the relocated building will be out of character architecturally or stylistically, or out of scale with the new location; if the relocated building may negatively impact known archeological resources at the new site; or if significant architectural features will be left behind in the move.



**This home is one of the few village buildings the APRB has approved to relocate. The house was located on the village's smallest lot and severely deteriorated. The building had been previously moved and was set on an inadequate foundation that was accelerating the building's decay. By moving the building forward slightly on the same property, the owner was able to build a new foundation, add a garage at the rear, and expand the house with a small addition. The changes improved the house and the neighborhood.**

