

## **Old Market and Wholesale District Design Guidelines**

### ***Preamble***

Across the country preservationists are rejuvenating remnant, center city clusters of old buildings. The attraction is self-context: A cluster of old buildings creates a coherent but hardly homogeneous landscape-- whole block faces of integrally related structures that maintain in their remaining original detailing and long and well used appearance their own individuality, often in contrast to new structures elsewhere in the center city. Unfortunately, rejuvenated structures and the districts they comprise have frequently been made to stand for something that never was.

Standing for something that never was reflects in our society an implied notion of retrogression -- the notion that the life our predecessors led was superior to our own. The notion hardly needs elaboration. But attractive material metaphors of the past, whether in Disneyland or in downtown, can fool anyone who wishes to be fooled. Thus, for instance, the practice of architectural polychromy has become especially popular. Architectural polychromy is controlled preservation in which colors are manipulated according to a preconceived system for specific aesthetic ends, often to produce an emblem of the past, which by conscious mimicry and imitation alludes to historicism. By historicism is meant the fostering or adoption of undue reliance upon historical forms and styles to the point of fabricating ornamentation, of producing conceit.

In allowing ourselves to be so foolishly fooled, in contriving places, we preclude fostering what historic preservation, a prime instrument for rejuvenating commercial districts, was originally all about. We preclude fostering spontaneity. To the extent that we impose preconceived ideas manifested in aesthetic and functional purity on rejuvenated commercial districts we fail quite miserably at creating a source of spontaneity. The rejuvenation of Omaha's Old Market, however, illustrates how preservation can produce spontaneity without strict external architectural design review and without contrivance. Old structures in the Market have been successfully reinvigorated and complemented by innovative and attractive modern design applications. The result is a thoroughly enjoyable and honest place.

Omaha's Market is characterized by wholesale jobbing houses which developed from the 1870's and especially 1880's into the early twentieth century and which served to form a distribution center for goods shipped on the Union Pacific Railroad and its branch lines. Firms in the Market specialized in dry goods, hardware, agricultural implements, liquor, and produce. A few wholesalers were also manufacturers. Retail and service activities were relatively scarce, but several hotels, small restaurants, and a number of saloons served workers in the market. Some buildings have been adapted to modern transportation requirements, but, as would be expected, wholesaling and its related activities have been in decline for many years in the Market, and the character of the place has been considerably altered in the last generation.

The buildings extant in the Market exist as substantial and representative structures of the late nineteenth-century. The chief function of these buildings was provision for storage and associated light manufacturing or assembly. Their utilitarian nature dictated their form: standard masonry wall with interior columns of wood or cast iron to allow larger loft space. Architects turned to historicism (ironically) in an attempt to create distinction in street facades, and they utilized familiar forms, such as those commercial modes that were prevalent in Chicago. The vast majority of the buildings in the Market are of brick. Cast-iron fronts, metal cornices, stone trim, and metal sidewalk awnings, that were attached to several buildings where produce was marketed, also contribute to the Market's architectural character. The structures retain their integrity today, and the number of intrusions is small. Alterations have been limited mostly to first floors, and several buildings have full facades that are essentially intact.

Although historically a wholesale jobbing district, the Market has become a fashionable and prosperous retail shopping, entertainment, and residential area, one of the most attractive of many such districts in cities across the country. Part of the explanation for this success lies in the character of the Market as a place and in the philosophy behind its commercial redevelopment. The Market is not intended to be contrived or fabricated. Little explicit historical reference is invoked in the Market. Because of harmonious integration with contemporary design, positive use of space is encouraged. Continuity with the past is

maintained by remnants of the past, the structures themselves, of course, but also by presence of light manufacturing, petty wholesalers, and commission merchants. Remnant graphics establish a continuity with the past as well, but new graphics in historical styles are discouraged.

Moreover, while there is an identifiable center to the Market, no single structure focuses attention away from the contribution each structure makes to the overall sense of place in the Market. It is difficult to think of any particular structure as epitomizing the Market, although certain complexes, such as structures interconnected by awnings, and certain interiors, such as the enclosed passageway, do elicit recognition. It is, then, effect that counts. Buildings are associated inherently with one another and the whole district is used, not just one or two buildings. The buildings, while all of a type, are in and of themselves recognizably different if one looks at them, but texture, proxemics, human scale, and interrelated activities provide a universalizing coherence to the Market.

The effect is further enhanced by attempts to avoid a sharp boundary or edge. For instance, cars have complete access to the Market; no streets are set aside or cut off from the rest of downtown for pedestrian use. Presence of cars gives a sense of activity, access and security. To close off streets here would be to create a false environment.

Lastly, the Market has not been especially sanitized. Dirt and grime, as well as the personality (and personalities) of its downtown location, redeem the Market and make it a real place. Conspicuous and unrealistic standards of upkeep hardly reflect an environment meant to be well used. The philosophical underpinning of the Market reflects the lack of contrivance in the landscape: Nothing should stand for something that never was, nor should preconceived ideas be imposed on buildings. The basic style of buildings and harmony with original designs are retained. Exceptional modern design conforms quite well to these principles. In contrast, historic decoration trivializes a building by forcing associations, much as advertisers appeal with a positive image that has nothing to do with the product. In contrast to wholesale packaging of places or the imposition of explicit historical or other references, the Market's success as an entertainment center can be attributed in part to avoiding contrivance. The Market exhibits little pretension of being historic or any other "-ic." That is doing preservation right.

### ***Guidelines***

The following guidelines reflect the principles articulated above. These guidelines are not intended to be overly restrictive but to enhance the Market's existing character. As its popularity and use increase, and as land values increase, there will be growing demand on the area for denser land use, parking, and development. This, combined with multiple and changing ownership over time, requires protection for both owners and the public at large. Just as zoning provides collective protection against individual property misuse, these guidelines are meant to protect the Old Market's architectural quality and ownership investments.

### ***Building Site***

The way in which buildings are sited in the Old Market District adds significantly to the area's unique sense of place. The street-facing side of nearly every building in the District is sited directly on the property line and structures abut one another from side to side forming continuous block-long brick walls that distinctly define the limits of the street and give it a sense of enclosure. New construction, as well as rehabilitation work, should respect this established pattern. New structures should be built on the property line. Buildings that setback behind the property line or buildings that project beyond the property line into the right-of-way are not recommended. Upper stories that step back from, or project beyond, the established building plane are likewise not recommended. Demolition of existing structures is to be strictly avoided as it leaves major holes in the continuous plane of building walls and drastically lessens the effect of street enclosure.

### ***Building Scale***

The term "human scale" applies to the buildings of the Old Market area. No building is so large as to overpower or intimidate an individual (or another building) in the way that, for example, a modern high-rise building might. Buildings within the historic district range in bulk from narrow (22' wide), one-story structures to buildings covering one quarter block (132' square). The tallest building in the area is six stories. New construction in the Old Market District should be respectful of this existing scale. No new building or building addition in the Old Market Historic District should exceed six (6) stories in height. No new structure, with the possible exception of a parking structure, should exceed one-quarter block (132' x 132') in site coverage.

### ***Facades***

The structures of the Old Market District are typical of late 19th and early 20th century commercial architecture in that primary design emphasis is placed on the facade, or street-facing front, of each building. Building sides, commonly blank brick walls that abut tightly to one another, are a secondary consideration and are often never seen. Rear walls are strictly utilitarian in detail. It is primarily the facade--the location of all major architectural detail--that gives each Old Market building its individual character and style. The effect that a proposed facade change may have on the Old Market as a whole should be carefully considered. Major changes to principal facades that are not appropriate to the Old Market District include the following:

- Complete removal of entire original facade.
- Encasement of majority of original facade in metal or other material.
- Removal or obscuring of major distinguishing features such as cornices, lintels, decorative store and terra cotta work, and cast iron columns.
- Blocked-in windows.
- New window or door openings.\*
- Installation of replacement windows that do not correspond in size and approximate configuration to original windows.

*\* This prohibition does not apply to sidewalks that are exposed due to the loss of an adjacent building or are exposed due to a difference in heights of adjacent buildings or to side or rear walls that face onto alleyways. New openings in these instances, however, should be of a scale appropriate to the affected and surrounding buildings.*

### ***Storefronts***

The first floors of the majority of structures in the Old Market are typical of late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial architecture in that they often display large expanses of glass. The ability to see in and out of

buildings at street level is important to the character and appeal of the Old Market neighborhood. Proposed rehabilitation and new construction should respect this established pattern. Blank walls or walls with only a small percentage of windows at street level would not be appropriate.

### *Materials*

When considered in its entirety, the cohesiveness of the Old Market District is due, to a large extent, to the predominant use of dark red and brown brick. All other materials are subordinate to the overall context of brick buildings and streets, providing contrast, interest, variety and detail. Materials and textures proposed for any rehabilitation or new construction project should respect the overall dominant brick character of the Old Market District and should be assessed as to their impact on the area as a whole. The idea is not to stifle creativity or imagination by limiting materials to a specified range, but rather to assure that no proposed material diminishes the dominant brick character of the district. For example, glass and smooth metal surfaces might be acceptable for use in a limited way on a street level storefront but not for cladding an entire existing building or as primary materials for a new structure.

Materials that are inappropriate to the Old Market District include:

- Materials that seek to imitate other materials such as wood-grained vinyl or laminate;
- Plastic brick, stone or marble; or Styrofoam wood.
- Sheets of brick veneer, such as z-brick.
- Unpainted or rough-sawn wood.
- Mirrored or tinted glass.
- Asbestos, asphalt, vinyl or aluminum siding.

### *Color*

Although the color of individual buildings within the Old Market District varies, the predominant color of the area, when viewed in total, is a dark reddish brown. This is due to the preponderance of brick used for both buildings and streets. Many colors can be found in the area, but they are used in a way that does not detract from the overall earth-tone color of the district. Many of the cast iron storefronts are painted black. Much of the original brick remains unpainted. Bright colors are used sparingly, to accent details. These established color patterns should be respected. Any color proposed for use within the Old Market District should be compatible with the existing reddish brown color that characterizes the area. Bright colors are acceptable when used to accent details such as doors or awnings but are not appropriate when used on large surfaces such as entire storefronts or entire buildings if they detract significantly from the overall earth-tone color of the Old Market area. Previously unpainted brick, stone or terra cotta surfaces that can be viewed from the public right-of-way should not be painted.

### *Canopies*

The canopies that cover the sidewalks in parts of the Old Market District are particularly unique features of the areas and are very important to its character. The effect that any proposed rehabilitation or new construction project has on the existing canopies should be carefully considered. Removal of any canopies should be strictly avoided. Deteriorated canopies should be repaired rather than replaced when possible. New canopies should not be added to existing structures, as they would detract from the authenticity of the original canopies. New canopies may be appropriate as a part of new construction, either as part of new buildings or free-standing around or within parking areas. New canopies should be designed in a way that distinguishes them from the original canopies.

### *Awnings*

As canvas awnings were typically used as shading devices on late nineteenth and early twentieth century structures, the use of canvas awnings is appropriate in the Old Market Historic District. Awnings should be attached to structures in a way that will not severely damage them. The shape of canvas awnings should reflect the shape of the opening for which they are designed, that is, round awnings should be used for round openings, rectangular awnings for rectangular openings, etc.

### *Roof Line*

A flat roof concealed by a parapet (that portion of the building wall that extends beyond the roof) is the standard roof type existing in the Old Market District. Parapets are often embellished with decorative cornices or may step down to display a slightly irregular skyline. Rehabilitation or new construction within the district should respect this dominant roof form. Roof types not found in the district area--such as gable, hip, gambrel, mansard, pent and shed--should not be used.

### *Public Improvements*

Public improvements, such as the original streets, curbs and sidewalks of the Old Market area as well as later additions, such as the large, round planters at 11th and Howard, the street trees and grates, and the fountain at 11th and Jackson Streets, all contribute to the character of the District. Additionally, the presence of cars on Old Market streets adds to the liveliness and security of the area. Any construction or reconstruction proposed within the street right-of-ways in the Old Market District should be done in a way that is complementary to the entire historic district. Brick streets should be repaired with brick rather than patched or replaced with concrete or asphalt. Original sandstone curbs should be retained when possible. The replacement of entire features of streetscape - such as sidewalks - when limited replacement of deteriorated or missing pieces is appropriate, should be avoided. Exposed public utilities such as telephone wire, television cables, etc., should be confined to the alleys. Additional street trees and grates proposed for use within the Old Market District should be compatible in type and spacing with the existing street trees. Any construction that would permanently close streets in the Old Market to vehicular traffic would not be appropriate. However, it may be appropriate to permanently close portions of alleyways.

### *Signs*

Much of the character of the Old Market District is due to its historic signs as well as to the fact that designs for modern signs have been, for the most part, compatible with the area. In order to retain and reinforce the historic character of the Old Market it is important that all future signs be of a scale and design appropriate to the district. It is also important to discourage the use of pseudo-historic signs - that is, new signs that affect a historic appearance - as they detract from the genuine historical value of the Old Market.

The following types of signs are encouraged within the Old Market Historic District:

- Signs mounted parallel with the building face, particularly those mounted on the lintel above the first story of the building. These signs should not project more than 3" from the building face.
- Signs painted on or inside of display windows.
- Projecting and hanging signs of moderate size.
- Signs on awnings.
- Banners and flags.
- The retention and preservation of signs and advertising painted on historic walls, if of historic or artistic interest (especially where they provide evidence of early or original occupants).
- Use of indirect illumination rather than internal illumination (back-lighting).

All signs within the Old Market Historic district are subject to the following regulations:

- The area of all signs on a building shall not exceed an area of two-square-feet for each foot of street frontage occupied by the building, and shall in no event exceed a total of 100-square-feet on each street frontage.
- Projecting signs for each establishment shall be limited to one 13-square-foot double-sided sign on each street frontage occupied by the establishment. Faces of double sided signs shall be parallel. Signs shall be placed perpendicular to the building face.

- A sign may not project perpendicularly beyond the property line more than 6'-6", except for signs mounted beneath canopies, which may extend to within two feet of the curb line. All projecting signs must maintain a minimum vertical clearance of 8'-6".\*
- Buildings with sidewalk canopies shall have no signs placed on the building above the roof line of the canopy.
- The tops of all signs shall be placed no higher than the sill line of the second story windows for buildings two stories or taller, or no higher than 3 feet below the highest point of the front wall for one story buildings. Simple black or gold letters applied to windows above the first floor are excepted. Banners and flags are excepted.
- Roof signs are not allowed.
- No signs shall be mounted on the roofs of the historic street canopies.
- Signs on awnings are allowed provided their total area is included in the total allowed sign area and their lettering is consistent in style and color with other signs on the same building.
- Banners and flags are allowed provided each does not exceed 24-square-feet in area and the area is included in the total allowed sign area, unless purely graphic or patriotic in content.
- Back-lit signs are discouraged, but may be allowed if only letters are back-lighted.
- Projecting back-lit signs are not allowed.
- Neon signs are generally not allowed. However, a neon sign of unique and exceptional design that particularly contributes to the distinctive character of the Old Market District may be submitted to the Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission for consideration. (see Attachment A)
- Stock signs bearing advertising for someone other than, or in addition to, the building tenant are not allowed.
- Flashing signs are not allowed.
- Plastic signs are not allowed.
- Florescent paint or reflecting surfaces are not allowed.
- Letters no more than 6 inches high are preferred. The use of more than two typefaces per sign is not recommended.
- Signs shall be placed in a manner so as not to obscure significant architectural details or features.
- Temporary signs and posters made of cardboard, paper, or similar temporary material advertising coming events of importance to the community will be permitted in the Old Market District. It is encouraged that the appearance of such signs conforms to that defined in these regulations. If the size does not exceed four-square-feet, submission to the Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission will not be required. Temporary signs and posters should not be placed more than three weeks prior to the event and shall be removed no later than one week after the advertised event.

*\* These guidelines for canopy mounted signs are for purposes of design review in the Old Market Historic District and do not in any way abrogate the sign restrictions of the Omaha Municipal Code.*

(Suggestions for good sign design, excerpted from the Boston Sign Code)

1. Do not use too many colors on a sign. Too many colors can work against each other and detract from the strength of a sign's visual image. A simple combination of black and/or white and a single well-chosen color is often the most striking and effective.
2. Try to relate the general color effect of the sign to the building to which it belongs.
3. Choose a style of letter that is appropriate to the business and building. (Preferably no more than one style per sign.)
4. Make sure that the letters are clearly legible, whatever style is chosen, or they will not be doing their job. It should be emphasized that the greatest legibility is not necessarily the result of the largest size letters.
5. Choose the size of the letters carefully. Just as the sign should be in proportion to its building, the size of the letters should be in proportion--both to the sign and the building.

*Exception Clause*

*Proposed work not conforming fully to these guidelines may be approved by the Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission providing that there is reasonable justification for the exception and that the work particularly contributes to the distinctive character of the Old Market and Wholesale District.*

**ATTACHMENT A**

Neon Policy

*(The following was developed by the Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission in the late 1980's. It was created in response to numerous requests from tenants and owners in the District as to what was considered acceptable for neon signs. These criteria were not included in the guidelines when they were approved by the City Council. They are subject to change without notice.)*

As stated in the Old Market and Wholesale District Design Guidelines. "Neon signs are generally not allowed. However, a neon sign of unique and exceptional design that particularly contributes to the distinctive character of the Old Market District may be submitted to the Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission for consideration." The Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission will consider designs for neon signs within the Old Market and Wholesale District that meet the following five criteria:

1. The Neon sign must not exceed four square feet in total area.
2. The neon sign must be inside of the structure.
3. No more than one neon sign per bay, or 22', whichever is the greater distance.
4. The neon sign must be located entirely within one window or door opening.
5. The neon sign is limited to the name and/or logo of the establishment.

**ATTACHMENT B**

Mural Policy

*(The Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission developed the following mural policy to address a request for a mural in summer of 1997 which could not be evaluated under the current sign or paint guidelines.)*

The Old Market and Wholesale District Design Guidelines state that the Market is not intended to be contrived or fabricated, and to avoid contrivance, preconceived ideas should not be imposed on buildings. The guidelines further address the positive nature of remnant graphics but discourage new graphics in historical styles. The preamble to the guidelines should be referenced for further statements regarding the overall image and aesthetic goals of the Old Market.

The presence of murals can detract from the historic character of the Old Market, and therefore, are not recommended.