



# Commercial Design Guidelines



## SITE LAYOUT AND BUILDING PLACEMENT

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1. **Street Edge Condition** – A mixed-use commercial and residential building should come up to the principle street property line. The building shall be built close to or at the edge of the sidewalk and should extend along the entire street frontage as far as is practicable.
2. **Side Street Setbacks** - The building should generally be up to the street property line of the secondary street and should not be more than 5' from that line.
3. **First Floor Uses** – The area at the interiors of buildings along street frontage should be active uses as opposed to mechanical, utilitarian and parking uses.
4. **Parking Location** - The parking should be predominantly behind the building and a small portion might be acceptable at the side of the building. Parking shall be located off the rear alley unless a unique site layout can achieve better site utilization and building design. Parking is not allowed at street intersections.
5. **Parking Access** – Vehicle access to the parking should be from the least prominent, least pedestrian street.
6. **Structured Parking Access** – When a building proposes interior, structured parking, interior loading docks, or similar situations, the access point and/or vehicular door should not be placed on the primary street façade and should preferably be from the rear side or alley side of the building. When no rear and alley options exist and access must be from the less pedestrian street, any door should be recessed from the façade by at least a couple of feet. Provisions should be made for pedestrian safety where the drive crosses the public sidewalk, and the curb cut should be minimal in size.
7. **Storm Water Management Techniques** – Pervious paving materials, landscaping integral with the design, green roofs and underground water retention should be used in the urban setting. Storm water management ponds should not be used.

## MASSING AND FORM

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1. **Building Height** – A building on an arterial street should preferably be 2 to 3 stories in height or meet the context and zoning of the neighborhood to ensure sufficient bulk. If appropriate with the existing neighborhood context, additional floors may be appropriate.
2. **Modulation Along Street / Varied Elements** – Urban buildings should have a vertical emphasis rather than a long, horizontal appearance. The facade design and fenestration patterns shall reflect and be compatible with that of the existing buildings. When larger mixed-use buildings are long by program need, the building should be divided into smaller proportions. The use of window grouping, vertical pilasters or other architectural elements will create this effect. An over emphasis of this articulation, either in trying to make a larger building look like a series of significantly different small buildings or by extreme variation in surface plane should be avoided.

3. **First Floor Height** – The first floor height to the finished ceiling should be at least 14' in height to ensure appropriate scale of the base of the building in relation to the upper floors.
4. **Roof Type/Shapes** – The roof configuration should typically be flat. Special corner elements, entrance area massing and similar conditions may have roofs that vary from the predominant roof form, however care should be given not to over-emphasize these elements and shapes in an inappropriate manner for the context.
5. **Massing at Corner** – The massing of the building should address the intersection of the two most principal commercial streets with an element of interest and significance.

## FACADES

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1. **Street Facing Facades** - The facade shall be oriented to the main arterial street with the primary entrances and storefronts facing that street. Finished elevations should wrap around corners where visible from principle streets.
2. **Wall Depth / Material Detailing** – The overall quality of façade is significantly impacted by the perceived “depth” of the façade. Walls that have different materials and elements that occur in the same plane will appear flat and life-less and should be avoided. Where the differing materials of a façade meet up, there should be a significant change in surface plane, likely 4-8 inches in difference. Differing materials should typically terminate at inside corners.
3. **Delineation Between First / Base Floor and Upper Floors** – The area where the first floor commercial base meets the second floor, residential, or other use, should be clearly defined with a strong cornice, sign band or other significant element.
4. **Roof Cornice Line** - Traditional commercial street buildings typically have a perimeter parapet which helps define the building stylistically. The building should have a defined and significant top edge.

## FIRST FLOOR / STREET LEVEL FACADES

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1. **First Floor Building Façade Materials** – High quality, durable finish materials should be used on the first floor street façade of buildings. This may include materials such as face brick and stone. Utility, decorative scored or split-faced block are not appropriate. Split face block might be considered at the base up to no more than 2 ½ feet above the sidewalk. Simulated stucco is not durable enough for use on the first floor.
2. **Entrances** – Buildings should have entrances on the primary arterial street frontage. Corner buildings should have entrances at the corners. Entrances should generally be recessed within the façade so that the door swing does not obstruct pedestrian movement on the public sidewalk, be sized accordingly for the use, utilize double doors, if applicable, include sidelights and enhanced with other appropriate detailing.
3. **Storefront Windows** - Storefront windows must always meet minimum zoning code requirements, however, Developers are encouraged to maximize the glazing area as reasonably as possible. They should be well designed to reflect the typical traditional

street patterns. Storefront windows should have a slight in-set so as not to appear flat. Glass should be clear, non-tinted glazing. Minimum street frontage requirements for windows can be found at 295-605, Design Standard in the Milwaukee Zoning Code of Ordinance found at this link:

<http://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/ccClerk/Ordinances/Volume-2/CH295-sub6.pdf>

4. **Storefront Window Proportions** - Windows should be large glazed panels, with smaller transom units above, if applicable. A lower bulkhead not exceeding 2' above sidewalk grade is generally appropriate. Windows should fill most of the height of the first or base floor, to at least 12' above sidewalk grade. A series of narrow, vertical windows are typically not appropriate. While there is no specific dimension that is considered too narrow, the overall proportions and height need to be considered. Likely, if the central storefront window panes are less than 5' in width, they may be inappropriate. Long groupings of storefront windows should typically have intermediate piers that help incorporate the commercial base with the massing above, ensuring the building does not appear "top-heavy or unsupported"
5. **Extensions into the Public Right of Way** - Hoods, fixed awning and other projecting elements towards the top of the base floor elevation are encouraged to help engage the street and further define the building in a three dimensional manner. Allowable projections and extensions in the right-of-way can be found in the City of Milwaukee Code of Ordinances Chapter 245 at this link:  
<http://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/ccClerk/Ordinances/Volume-2/CH245.pdf>
6. **Fabric Awnings** - Awnings should not be a vinyl material nor be back lit.
7. **Wall Signage** – Building signage should be integral to the design of the façade, place in the sign band above the first floor windows or on blank wall areas specifically intended for signage. Signage can be internally illuminated individual letter signs or external illuminated traditional board signs. No internally illuminated box signs are permitted.

## UPPER FLOOR FACADES

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1. **Upper Floor Building Façade Materials** – Street-facing façades should have finished quality materials. Brick veneer is typically the most appropriate choice for a traditional neighborhood arterial street. Block, vinyl siding or other low quality materials are not appropriate.
2. **Upper Floor Windows** – Windows on upper floors should be proportioned and placed in relation to grouping of storefront or other windows and elements in the base floor. Windows should have a vertical emphasis. The windows on the upper story facade should generally be double-hung, tall and narrow in proportion, and spaced appropriately. Fenestration patterns that are designed as individual windows should ensure there is some depth to the window from the surface of the wall. An in-set of at least 4", preferably 8", is appropriate to achieve an appearance of depth to the façade. This is particularly important when the windows are set in a stucco finished exterior wall.
3. **Upper Floor Balconies** – The design and positioning of any street-facing balconies should be integral with the overall design of the building, relating to overall massing, window placement and proportion. Balconies that have some in-set aspect or are nested in corners typically work well. Balconies that have the appearance of being tacked on are discouraged and may not be allowed in some contexts. The underside of balconies should have a finished appearance, and not be unpainted lumber.

## SITE DETAILS

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1. **Pedestrian Paving / Sidewalks** – In the urban environment, the ground space between the building frontage and the public sidewalk should typically be paved. In unique cases on portions of building façades that do not have windows, landscaping in integral planters might be acceptable.
2. **Service and Loading Docks** – Utilitarian functions such as service and loading docks, trash enclosures, utility vaults, communication equipment, and other similar functions and equipment should be located at the rear or alley side of a development. Where function such as trash enclosures, loading docks, utility equipment and similar objects might be visible from a side street or neighboring property, they should be screened with a masonry wall made of similar material as that of the building.
3. **Parking Lot Landscaping** – Parking lots should meet the minimum screening and landscaping standards of [Chapter 295-405](#), found in the general provisions of the City's Zoning Code. An illustrated guidebook describing requirements for parking lot landscaping can be found at [Milwaukee.gov/LandscapeCode](http://Milwaukee.gov/LandscapeCode).
4. **Free Standing Signage** – Free Standing signs should be avoided whenever possible and should only be considered where unique sites have access from streets opposite of the main façade. Small directional pedestrian and parking lot signage should be integral to the design. Any freestanding signage needed should be Type A Monument type sign, with a base of finished masonry consistent with the building materials. Please see zoning code, section 295-407 for complete information on signage. <http://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/ccClerk/Ordinances/Volume-2/CH295-sub4.pdf>
5. **Fences and Buffer at Neighbors** – Adjacent properties should be screened from the parking lot of the development per requirements of the Zoning Code.

## USE OF THESE GUIDELINES

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The preceding guidelines were developed for typical commercial redevelopment projects. Specific site conditions and local context may take precedent over these guidelines. In the case of rehabilitation of existing properties, these guidelines should be used as a reasonable starting point for design consideration. Adherence to these guidelines does not supersede zoning code (<http://city.milwaukee.gov/PlanningPermits/DCDzoninglink.htm#.VgWme00o7q4>), overlay districts, historic building or district requirements, ADA requirements, building codes or any other codes or standards required for a specific property.