

6. Guidelines for Signage

City of San Antonio Historic Design Guidelines

Office of Historic Preservation



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Using the Historic Design Guidelines

The City of San Antonio Historic Design Guidelines (“Historic Design Guidelines”) establish baseline guidelines for historic preservation and design. The Historic Design Guidelines apply to all **exterior** modifications for properties that are individually designated landmarks or within a locally designated historic district. All applicants are encouraged to review the Historic Design Guidelines early in their project to facilitate an efficient review process. In addition to compliance with the Unified Development Code (“UDC”), applicants must obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness (“COA”) from the Office of Historic Preservation (“OHP”) for all proposed exterior modifications as described in the Using the Historic Design Guidelines section of the Historic Design Guidelines. The Historic Design Guidelines are comprised of eight sections as follows:

- 1. Using the Historic Design Guidelines
- 2. Guidelines for Exterior Maintenance and Alterations
- 3. Guidelines for Additions
- 4. Guidelines for New Construction
- 5. Guidelines for Site Elements
- **6. Guidelines for Signage**
- 7. A Guide to San Antonio’s Historic Resources
- 8. Glossary

The Historic Design Guidelines as a whole are intended to work congruently with other sections, divisions and articles of the UDC but have been separated into individual sections for ease of use. In the event of a conflict between other sections or articles of the UDC and these Historic District Guidelines, the Historic District Guidelines shall control except in the case of signage where the more strict regulation or guideline shall control. Additionally, if an exception from the application of Chapter 28 of the city code of San Antonio has been approved for signage in historic districts, such exception shall remain unless removed by official action of the City Council. The meaning of any and all words, terms or phrases in the Historic District Guidelines shall be construed in accordance with the definitions provided in Appendix A of the UDC. In the case of a conflict regarding a definition as provided in these guidelines and Appendix A of the UDC, the Historic District Guidelines definition shall control. All images courtesy of the City of San Antonio, Clarion Associates, and Hardy, Heck, Moore, Inc. unless otherwise noted.

For questions and guidance please contact the Office of Historic Preservation: Email: ohp@sanantonio.gov | Phone: 210.215.9274

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Why Preserve?

A message from Historic Preservation Officer, Shanon Shea Miller

We strive to preserve San Antonio's historic buildings and neighborhoods for many reasons. We recognize and celebrate the cultural, aesthetic, environmental and economic value historic preservation brings to San Antonio. It is by definition sustainable and is a proven economic development tool. No example in this country of successful central city revitalization has occurred without preservation as a component.

- Preserving our built environment helps tell the **story** of San Antonio's long, rich and diverse history. Taking care of our older buildings and neighborhoods provides a sense of belonging, a collective memory, and a sense of pride in our past. Preservation is about understanding that historic buildings are limited resources and we must be careful to preserve those that tell our many and varied stories. This includes not just major historic sites but neighborhood schools and parks, streets lined with bungalows, theaters, small-scale commercial buildings, shot gun houses, gas stations, and towering downtown landmarks.
- Preservation helps build strong **neighborhoods** by protecting their character. Preservation programs foster community pride, appreciation of history, learning, creativity, and a sense of place, thus making historic neighborhoods desirable places to live and work.



- Preservation is good for the **economy**. Reinvesting in our historic buildings and neighborhoods helps to stabilize our property values and community, and promotes tourism and economic development. Historic preservation is more labor-intensive than new construction and generally utilizes more local materials. Every time a building is rehabilitated or reused, specialized trades and skilled laborers are employed. This creates jobs and puts more money into our local economy.
- Additionally, historic preservation contributes to the **tourism** industry in our city. Studies have shown that the heritage visitor stays longer and spends more than any other category of visitor. These people are looking for the jewels that locals cherish...often it's our historic buildings and neighborhoods that provide that sense of place and community that attracts visitors, while contributing to the quality of life for local citizens. As Donovan Rypkema says, "Place is not a synonym for location. Place is a location that has been claimed by feelings." For that and many other reasons, historic preservation is good for the local economy!

- Preservation helps protect the **environment**. Reusing and adapting historic buildings and neighborhoods reduces our consumption of raw land, new materials, and other resources. Rehabilitating existing buildings and maintaining existing materials are sustainable solutions and are most often more cost effective over the life of the building than replacement or new construction. Fortunately the green movement is recognizing that the greenest building ever built is the one that already exists! Stewardship of the built environment is sustainability as well as preservation.



We want our neighborhoods and commercial districts to continue to tell the story of San Antonio's history to those who come after us. This can best be done by preserving the condition of our historic resources and giving them new life and new purpose by making them our homes and places of business. The Historic Design Guidelines are intended to serve the community as we work together to preserve San Antonio's historic resources to provide a quality environment for future generation ***Preservation is not about longing for the past or resisting progress. It's about building on the past toward the future.***

Sharon

"Historic preservation has become a fundamental tool for strengthening American communities. It has proven to be an effective tool for a wide range of public goals including small business incubation, affordable housing, sustainable development, neighborhood stabilization, center city revitalization, job creation, promotion of the arts and culture, small town renewal, heritage tourism, economic development, and others."

– Donovan Rypkema, *Measuring Economic Impacts of Historic Preservation*, 2011



6. Guidelines for Signage

Introduction

These guidelines provide general guidance to property owners, design professionals, business-owners, and decision-makers regarding the maintenance and installation of signs; they are not intended as a substitute for consultation with qualified architects, contractors, attorneys, City of San Antonio staff, and/or the Historic and Design Review Commission ("HDRC"). Countless variables in the design and character of signage exist within San Antonio's historic districts. District-specific guidelines should address issues or elements that are unique within individual historic districts.

Applicability

The Historic Design Guidelines generally apply to all **exterior** modifications to properties that are located within a locally-designated historic district or that are individually designated landmarks. This section specifically applies to all types of exterior signage.

Compliance with UDC

Guidelines in this section are intended to supplement signage and billboard regulations contained in Section 35.612 and Chapter 28 of the UDC and should be reviewed and applied in conjunction with UDC regulations.

Guidelines

This section contains guidelines for all signs as follows:

- General
- Awning and Canopy Signs
- Projecting and Wall-Mounted Signs
- Freestanding Signs
- Window Signs

Projects involving multiple tenant-occupied buildings or multiple property owners are encouraged to submit a master signage plan. Once reviewed and approved by the HDRC, a master signage plan serves as the basis for future decision-making and allows signs submitted in accordance the plan to be approved administratively.

These guidelines contain numerous pictures, illustrations, drawings, and examples of projects that have successfully met, or failed to meet, the qualities that the guidelines address. Examples are provided only to illustrate and show context. They shall not be construed as the only possible design solutions allowed.

In considering whether to recommend approval or disapproval of an application for a COA for signage, the HDRC shall be guided by the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, the UDC, the Historic Design Guidelines, and any additional design guidelines adopted by the City.

General Principles

The following General Principles for signage will be considered during the review process in conjunction with the guidelines contained in this section.

Principle #1: Respect the Historic Context

New signs should complement, rather than compete with, the character of a historic building and the surrounding district. Not all allowed signage types are appropriate to individual historic districts or landmarks. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to historic context, building forms, and site layout when selecting, designing, and reviewing new signage. Appropriate uses for individual signage types are addressed in this subsection, as applicable.

Principle #2: Encourage a Visually Interesting Streetscape Free of Clutter

Signs have the ability to create a visually pleasing streetscape as well as improve pedestrian and traffic safety; however they can also be distracting if not designed properly. Consider the overall number, type, and design of signs used on individual buildings and along the streetscape to ensure new signs respect the historic surroundings and do not result in visual clutter.

Principle #3: Reinforce the Pedestrian-Oriented Nature of Commercial Uses

Signage was historically most prevalent in areas and on buildings that were used for commercial purposes; however, as San Antonio's historic districts evolve over time, the adaptive re-use of individual structure or specific districts will result in the introduction of signage in more areas and on more building types. Regardless of the location or building type, signage should be designed and scaled with pedestrians in mind.

Additional Resources

The Preservation of Historic Signs, Preservation Brief #25, by Michael J. Auer.
<http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief25.htm>

1. General

Why is this Important?

Signs were historically attached to or placed near buildings and designed to complement the overall character of the building while conveying necessary information. New signs should not detract from the character-defining features of the building or damage elements of the historic building. The preservation of historic signs is also important as the adaptive reuse of historic structures occurs over time.



Ghost signs or other signs characteristic of the building's or district's period of significance should be preserved as historic buildings are rehabilitated for alternative uses.



Excessive signage and poor signage placement can be distracting and create visual clutter.

Guidelines

A. GENERAL

- i. **Number and size**—Each building will be allowed one major and two minor signs. Total requested signage should not exceed 50 square feet.
- ii. **New signs**—Select the type of sign to be used based on evidence of historic signs or sign attachment parts along the building storefront where possible. Design signs to respect and respond to the character and/or period of the area in which they are being placed. Signs should identify the tenant without creating visual clutter or distracting from building features and historic districts.
- iii. **Scale**—Design signage to be in proportion to the facade, respecting the building's size, scale and mass, height, and rhythms and sizes of window and door openings. Scale signage (in terms of its height and width) to be subordinate to the overall building composition.

B. HISTORIC SIGNS

- i. **Preservation**—Preserve historic signs, such as ghost signs or other signs characteristic of the building's or district's period of significance, whenever possible.
- ii. **Maintenance**—Repair historic signs and replace historic parts in-kind when deteriorated beyond repair.

C. PLACEMENT AND INSTALLATION

- i. **Location**—Place signs where historically located and reuse sign attachment parts where they exist. Do not erect signs above the cornice line or uppermost portion of a facade wall, or where they will disfigure or conceal architectural details, window openings, doors, or other significant details.
- ii. **Obstruction of historic features**—Avoid obscuring historic building features such as cornices, gables, porches, balconies, or other decorative elements with new signs.
- iii. **Damage**—Avoid irreversible damage caused by installing a sign. For example, mount a sign to the mortar rather than the historic masonry.
- iv. **Pedestrian orientation**—Orient signs toward the sidewalk to maintain the pedestrian oriented nature of the historic districts.

D. DESIGN

- i. **Inappropriate materials**—Do not use plastic, fiberglass, highly reflective materials that will be difficult to read, or other synthetic materials not historically used in the district.

- ii. **Appropriate materials**—Construct signs of durable materials used for signs during the period of the building's construction, such as wood, wrought iron, steel, aluminum, and metal grill work.
- iii. **Color**—Limit the number of colors used on a sign to three. Select a dark background with light lettering to make signs more legible.
- iv. **Typefaces**—Select letter styles and sizes that complement the overall character of the building façade. Avoid hard-to-read or overly intricate styles.

E. LIGHTING

- i. **Lighting sources**—Use only indirect or bare-bulb sources that do not produce glare to illuminate signs. All illumination shall be steady and stationary. Internal illumination should not be used.
- ii. **Neon lighting**—Incorporate neon lighting as an integral architectural element or artwork appropriate to the site, if used.

F. PROHIBITED SIGNS

- i. An abbreviated list of the types of signs prohibited within San Antonio's historic districts and on historic landmarks is provided below. Refer to UDC Section 35-612(j) and Chapter 28 of the Municipal Code for more detailed information on prohibited signs.
 - Billboards, junior billboards, portable signs, and advertising benches.
 - Pole signs.
 - Revolving signs or signs with a kinetic component.
 - Roof mounted signs, except in the case of a contributing sign.
 - Digital and/or LED lighted signs, not to include LED light sources that do not meet the definition of a sign.
 - Moored balloons or other floating signs that are tethered to the ground or to a structure.
 - Any sign which does not identify a business or service within the historic district or historic landmark.
 - Any non-contributing sign which is abandoned or damaged beyond 50 percent of its replacement value, including parts of old or unused signs.
 - Notwithstanding the above, signs designated as a contributing sign or structure by the historic preservation officer shall not be prohibited unless or until such designation is revoked.

G. MULTI-TENANT PROPERTIES

- i. **Signage Plan**—Develop a master signage plan or signage guidelines for the total building or property.
- ii. **Directory signs**—Group required signage in a single directory sign to minimize visual color and promote a unified appearance.

Prohibited Signs



To maintain the focus on San Antonio's historic resources, pole signs, billboards, portable signs, and other signs that result in visual clutter are prohibited.

2. Awning and Canopy Signs

Why is this Important?

Awning signs are typically incorporated into the awning valance. In addition to identifying a business, awning and canopy signs may protect pedestrians and merchandise from sun, rain, and heat. The repetition of awnings along a block can provide a sense of scale as well as separating the storefront from the upper stories.



When used correctly, awnings can complement the overall character of the building's façade and contribute to the pedestrian character of an area.

Guidelines

A. GENERAL

- i. **Appropriate usage**—Limit the use of awning and canopy signs to building forms that historically used awnings, most typically commercial storefronts and apartment buildings.
- ii. **Placement**—Place signs on the awning or canopy valance, the portion that is parallel with the window.
- iii. **Mounting**—Install awning hardware in a manner that does not damage historic building elements or materials.

B. DESIGN

- i. **Materials**—Fabricate awnings using fire-resistant canvas in a color that is appropriate to the period of the building.
- ii. **Shape**—Select awning shapes that reflect the door or window openings they cover. Limit valances to approximately eight to twelve inches in length.
- iii. **Lettering and symbols**—Lettering should generally be placed on the valance portion of the awning.

C. LIGHTING

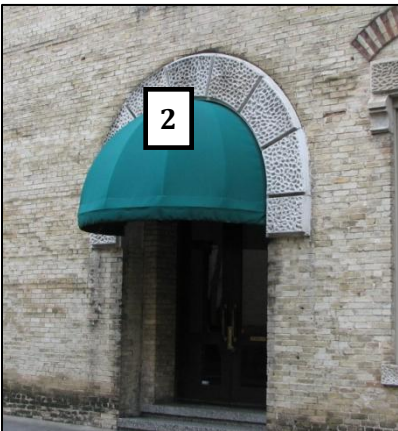
- i. **Internal illumination**—Do not use internal illumination or other techniques that cause awnings to glow; however, illumination may be concealed in the awning to provide directional light to illuminate sidewalks or storefronts.

D. METAL CANOPIES

- i. **Placement**—Do not mount new signs or letters on historic metal canopies in a manner that destroys or conceals historic materials.

Awning and Canopy Signs

- 1** Lettering should be placed on the valance portion of the awning.
- 2** Awning shapes should reflect the door or window openings they cover.
- 3** New canopy-mounted signs (center) should complement the scale and character of historic signage



The shape of the awning should reflect the window or door that it covers, and not detract from the character of the building façade

This



Not This



Awnings should not obstruct architectural features. Logos and lettering should reflect the character of the building and the nature of the business.

Lettering should be placed on the awning's valance, where it is legible to pedestrians (top, center). The size, shape, and number of awnings should not obscure a building's architectural features (bottom).

3. Projecting and Wall-Mounted Signs

Why is this Important?

Building-mounted signs, such as projecting signs or wall-mounted signs, play a significant role in complementing—or potentially detracting from—the character of a historic building and the surrounding district. Appropriate use of these sign types can help reinforce the historic character of the streetscape and the buildings they are intended to serve. Projecting signs are typically oriented towards pedestrians, making them most suitable to commercial or mixed-use districts with a more urban character.



Wall-mounted signs are typically mounted parallel and fastened to the wall of a building above the primary entrance. This unique sign complements the building it is attached to.



Projecting signs are generally two-sided signs suspended from the building and mounted perpendicular to its face.

Guidelines

A. GENERAL

- i. **Mounting devices**—Construct sign frames and panels that will be used to be attach signs to the wall of a building of wood, metal, or other durable materials appropriate to the building's period of construction.
- ii. **Structural supports**—Utilize sign hooks, expansion bolts, or through bolts with washers on the inside of the wall depending upon the weight and area of the sign, and the condition of the wall to which it is to be attached.
- iii. **Appropriate usage**—Limit the use of projecting and wall-mounted signs to building forms that historically used these types of signs, most typically commercial storefronts. To a lesser degree, these signage types may also be appropriate in areas where residential building forms have been adapted for office or retail uses, if sized accordingly.

B. PROJECTING SIGNS

- i. **Placement**—Mount projecting signs perpendicularly to a building or column while allowing eight feet of overhead clearance above public walkways.
- ii. **Public right-of-way**—Limit the extension of projecting signs from the building facade into the public right-of-way for a maximum distance of eight feet or a distance equal to two-thirds the width of the abutting sidewalk, whichever distance is greater.
- iii. **Area**—Projecting signs should be scaled appropriately in response to the building façade and number of tenants.

C. WALL-MOUNTED SIGNS

- i. **Area**—Limit the aggregate area of all wall-mounted signs to twenty-five percent of a building facade.
- ii. **Projection**—Limit the projection of wall-mounted signs to less than twelve inches from the building wall.
- iii. **Placement**—Locate wall signs on existing signboards—the area above the storefront windows and below the second story windows—when available. Mount wall signs to align with others on the block if an existing signboard is not available.
- iv. **Channel letters**—Avoid using internally-illuminated, wall-mounted channel letters for new signs unless historic precedent exists. Reverse channel letters may be permitted.

Building-Mounted Signs

1 Locate wall signs above storefront windows and below the second story windows.

2 Symbols and other graphical elements should be used to convey the type of business that the sign serves. A dark background with contrasting lettering also increases the legibility of this sign.

3 Building-mounted signs should not project more than twelve inches from the building wall.



Building-mounted signs should be simple in design so as not to compete with the building's historic character.

This



Corporate signage should reflect the historic character of the district.

Not This



Too much variation in the scale, design, and placement of signs on a commercial storefront creates a visually cluttered, confusing environment for pedestrians.



Signage for non-residential building types should be modest in scale and design so as not to distract from the historic character of the building it serves or the surrounding district.



The scale of building-mounted signs should complement, rather than visually compete with the historic structure(s) it serves.

4. Freestanding Signs

Why is this Important?

Freestanding signs are not attached to a building, and may include information on either or both sides. Small-scale freestanding signs can help reinforce the historic character of a residential buildings and streetscapes that have been adapted for office and retail uses, while providing necessary identification for businesses.



Historic freestanding sign in Downtown San Antonio.

Guidelines

A. GENERAL

- i. **Appropriate usage**—Freestanding signs are most appropriate in locations where building forms are set back from the street, such as in areas where historic residences have been adapted for office or retail uses, or in commercial districts where they may be used to identify parking areas or other accessory uses.
- ii. **Placement**—Place freestanding signs near the public right-of-way where they are clearly visible to passing pedestrians and motorists, a minimum of five feet from the street right-of-way and ten feet from all interior side lot lines. No freestanding sign should be placed in a manner that obstructs the pedestrian walkway.
- iii. **Number**—Limit the number of freestanding signs per platted lot to one, unless the lot fronts more than one street, in which case, one sign is allowed on each street on which the lot has frontage.
- iv. **Monument signs**—Do not use “suburban-style” monument signs or electronic messaging signs not historically found in San Antonio’s historic districts.

B. DESIGN

- i. **Height**—Limit the height of freestanding signs to no more than six feet.
- ii. **Area**—The size of new signs should be appropriate within the historic context, and should not exceed 25 square feet on either side, for a total of 50 square feet. Appropriate size shall be determined by considering historic precedent, sign patterns within historic districts, and conditions specific to individual properties.
- iii. **Structural supports**—Use subtle structural elements (in terms of their scale and mass) with historically compatible materials to support a freestanding sign.

This



The small-scale freestanding signs above complement the historic character of the converted historic residences they serve.

Not This



"Suburban-style" monument signs or electronic signs are not characteristic of San Antonio's Historic Districts and should not be used.

5. Window Signs

Why is this Important?

Window signs incorporate signs, pictures, symbols or some combination thereof to communicate information about an activity, business, commodity, event, sale, or service, that are visible from the exterior. Window signs are typically used as one element of an overall signage scheme to capture the attention of pedestrians. To avoid creating visual clutter that competes with other building signage, window signs should be simple and clean in design and cover a limited area of the window glazing.



In addition to conveying essential information, window signs provide visual interest for pedestrians and can complement the character of a historic district.

Guidelines

A. GENERAL

- i. **Location**—Limit the use of window signs to first floor windows where they may be readily viewed by pedestrians.
- ii. **Appropriate building types**—Use window signs in high traffic pedestrian areas, such as on commercial storefronts or other buildings that have been adapted for non-residential use.
- iii. **Historic signage**—Retain historic window signage if it reflects a historic building name, owner, or early business.

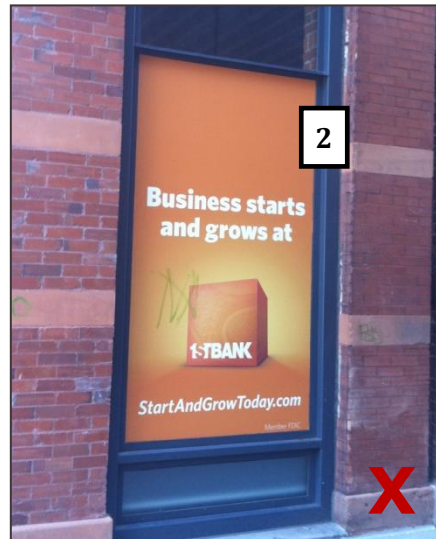
B. DESIGN

- i. **Window coverage**—Do not cover more than 30 percent of the window area with signage.
- ii. **Opacity**—Do not use window signs constructed of opaque materials that obscure views into and out of windows, either partially or completely.
- iii. **Prohibited window signs**—Do not use paper signs, banners, or graphic films that adhere to the exterior of window glazing.
- iv. **Symbols and lettering**—Incorporate lettering, symbols, and other design elements that reflect the type of business or institution at the location to increase a sign's impact.
- v. **Temporary signs and banners**—Place temporary signs in a manner that is appropriate for the building scale and style, as allowed by UDC sec. 35-612(i).



Window Signs

- 1 The clean lines and modest size of these window signs convey necessary information without creating visual clutter or distracting from overall character of these historic structures.
- 2 Opaque window signs or graphic films that obscure windows and views into and out of the building are not appropriate.



Window and door signage often serves as secondary signage, and should be scaled accordingly.

This



The clean lines and modest size of these window signs convey necessary information without creating visual clutter or distracting from overall character of these historic structures.

Not This



To avoid visual clutter, window signs should be limited to one type and should not cover more than 30 percent of the storefront window area.

