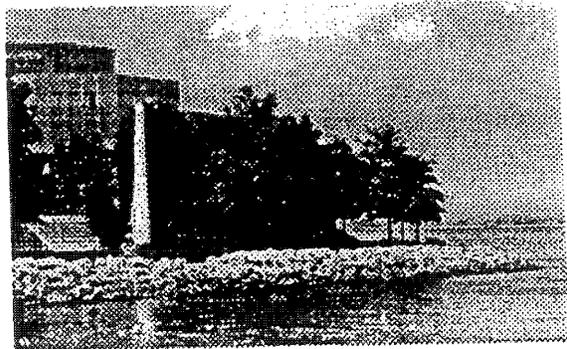
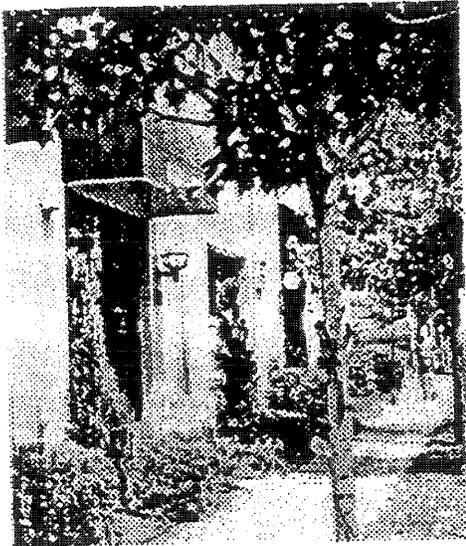
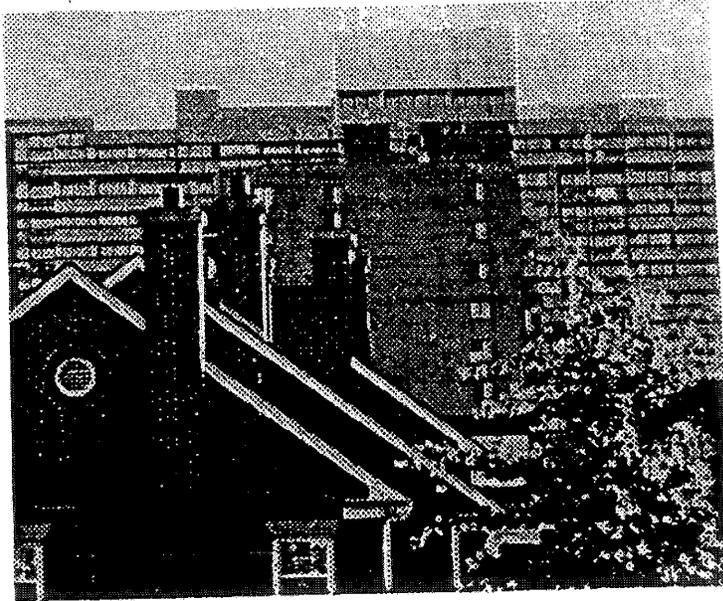


# Old Town North Urban Design Guidelines

*Adopted by City  
Council  
Sept 17, 1994*



July 1994

# Old Town North Urban Design Guidelines

Department of Planning and  
Community Development  
City of Alexandria, Virginia

July 1994

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# Old Town North Urban Design Guidelines

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### *Introduction*

Statement of Purpose .....	1
Background .....	1
Use of the Guidelines .....	2
Submission Requirements .....	3
Additional Requirements .....	3
Development of the Guidelines .....	4

### *Guidelines*

Sense of Place, Arrival and Community .....	5
Orientation of Buildings to the Street .....	7
Attractive Pedestrian Environment .....	9
Compatible Development .....	13

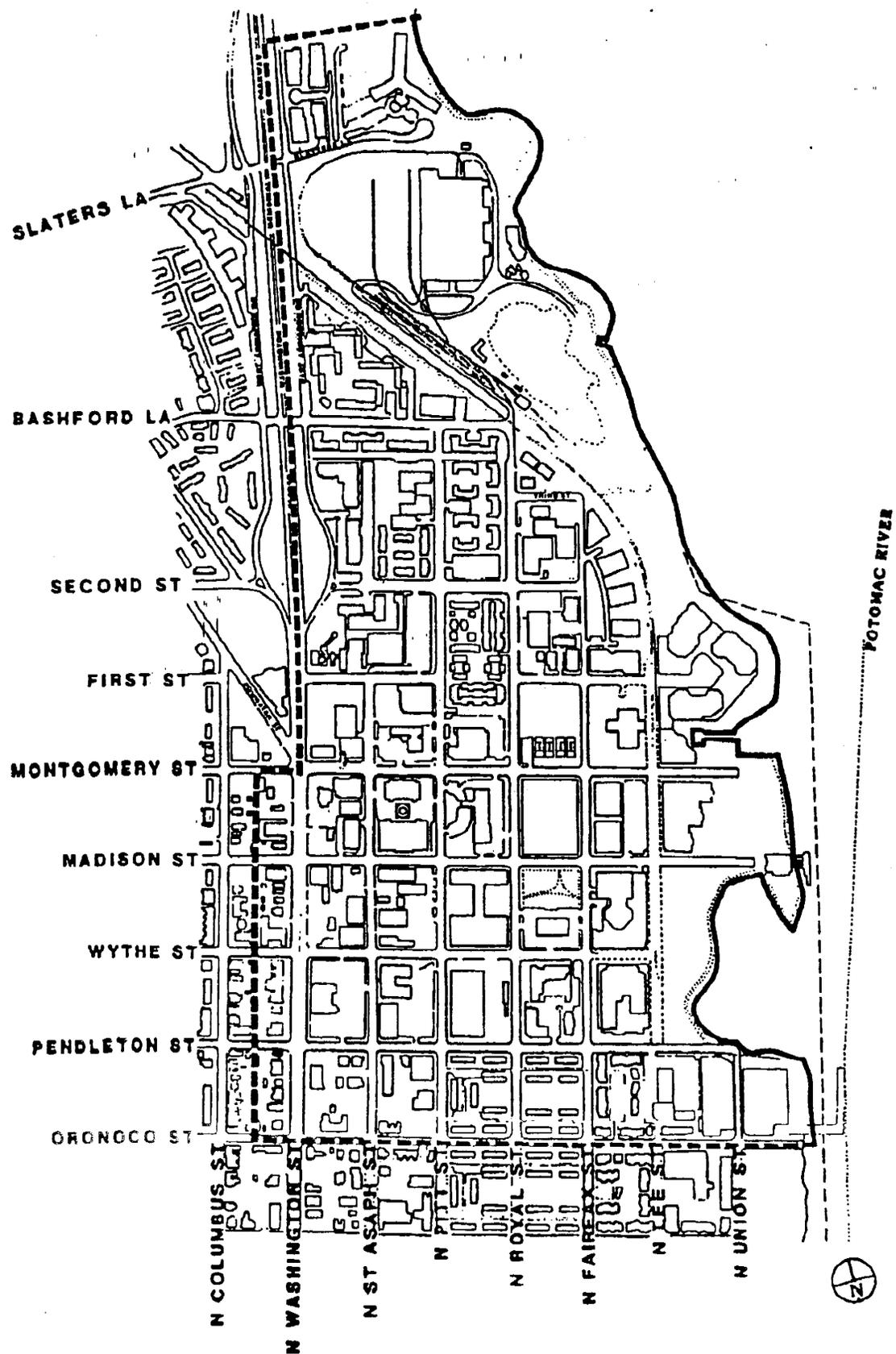


Fig. 1. Old Town North area

# Introduction

## Statement of Purpose

The purpose of these guidelines is to promote high quality architectural design within an urban context and to encourage a cohesive and attractive environment for the people who visit, work or live in Old Town North (Fig. 1). The purpose is not to provide detailed architectural or historical guidance, but to focus on those elements which contribute to a successful urban environment: how buildings relate to each other, to the neighborhood, to open areas, to the streetscape and automobile, and most importantly, to people.

Four goals have been identified as central to this purpose:

- *To foster a sense of place, arrival and community*
- *To orient buildings to the street*
- *To create an attractive pedestrian environment*
- *To encourage compatible development with parking underground or concealed.*

The guidelines are also intended to encourage property owners, architects and developers to consider the impact of each new building or rehabilitation project on the neighborhood as a whole; to increase community support of these projects; and, to strengthen the commitment among residents, business and property owners to a successful urban neighborhood.

## Background

Over the last two decades, Old Town North has experienced significant growth, both commercial and residential. Some of this development has been appropriate for the area and compatible with an urban environment. Many buildings, however, have not supported the pedestrian character of the neighborhood or provided any continuity among buildings in terms of massing, siting and orientation.

In 1989, citizens, business and property owners organized the Old Town North Community Task Force to respond to a Small Area Plan proposed by the city and to bring together all interested parties to address the needs and potential of the area.

The Task Force focused on the goal of creating an urban neighborhood with a mix of uses and a strong sense of place and community. After months of discussion, the Task Force developed a plan for the area that protected and encouraged residential uses, stressed pedestrian oriented design and called for urban design education and review.

This neighborhood-based plan was considered by the City as a part of the process of revising the Master Plan for the entire city (Fig. 2). After three years of discussion and negotiation, a Small Area Plan was adopted by the city as the Old Town North chapter of the revised Master Plan.

The adopted Small Area Plan provides development incentives in the form of higher densities for commercial and residential use. The Plan also provides development controls by designating Old Town North as an Urban Overlay District. The Urban Overlay District supplements traditional zoning controls with additional regulations designed to foster a desirable, active, urban environment.

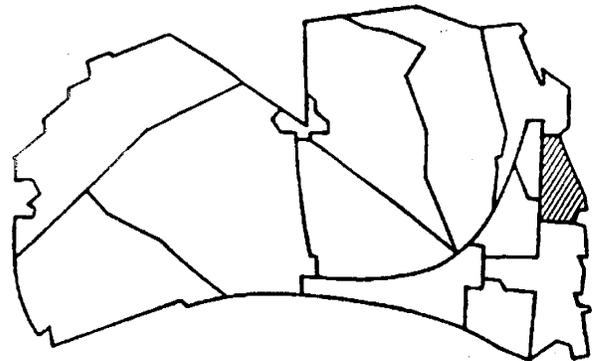


Fig. 2. Old Town North area in Alexandria

The Urban Overlay District regulations include the following:

**Underground Parking:** requiring underground parking or parking hidden within the building as a criteria for all projects which seek additional density through the special use permit process;

**Retail Focus Areas:** requiring ground floor retail uses in certain locations viewed as important to the desired pedestrian orientation of the area (Fig. 3); and,

**Urban Design Review:** establishing the Old Town North Urban Design Advisory Com-

mittee (UDAC), with members appointed by City Council, to review the applications of all projects which require Site Plan or Special Use Permit approval.

The Small Area Plan also called for the establishment of urban design guidelines for project review to help ensure that each new building or rehabilitation project supports the overall vision expressed in the Plan. This document addresses that requirement.

### Use of the Guidelines

The guidelines supplement the Old Town North Small Area Plan and all applicable City codes and ordinances. The guidelines are intended to be used by business and property owners, developers, builders and architects in Old Town North. They will also be used by city staff, the Planning Commission and City Council, and the UDAC in evaluating projects proposed for Old Town North.

The guidelines are recommended for any project which is located in Old Town North, but specifically apply to those new construction or rehabilitation projects which require Site Plan or Special Use Permit approval.

For these projects, the guidelines will be incorporated into the review process. The Zoning Ordinance requires the Planning Commission to consider urban design issues such as massing, location and orientation of buildings, parking, pedestrian and site amenities, compatibility with surrounding property and character of the neighborhood. The guidelines are intended to assist applicants in addressing these issues, and will serve as part of the criteria for project review.

As a part of its review process, the Department of Planning and Community Development will send a copy of the application to the UDAC for its review and comment. Comments from the UDAC will be sent along with recommendations of the planning staff to the Planning Commission for its consideration. For any project requiring a Special Use Permit, the recommendations of the Planning Commission will then be sent to City Council for its consideration.

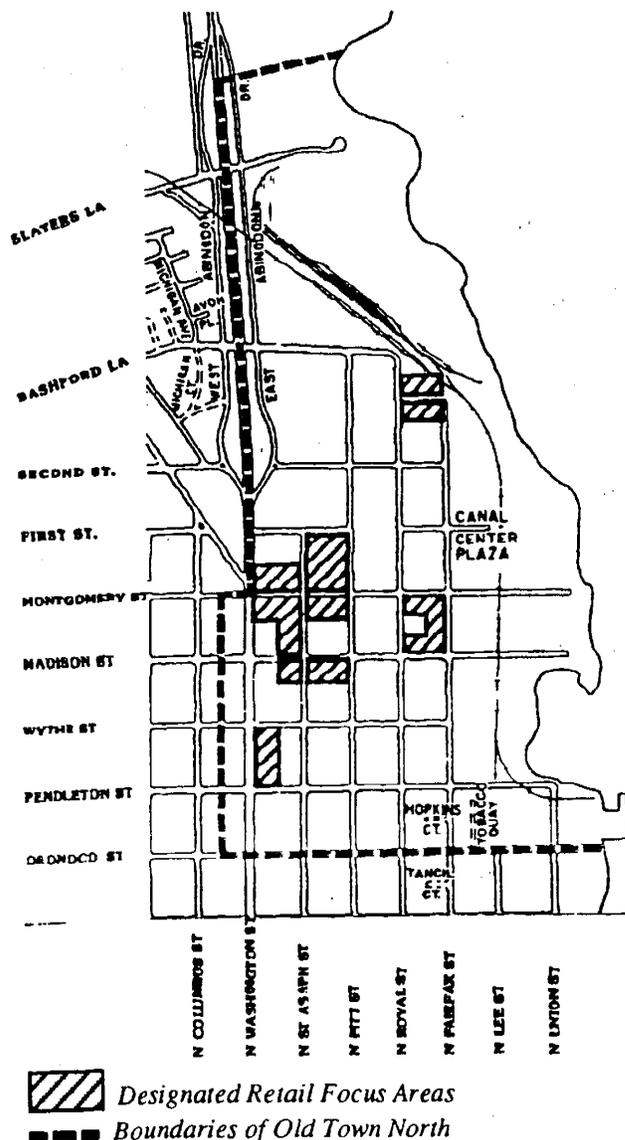


Fig. 3. Retail Focus Areas in Old Town North

Applicants are encouraged to meet with city staff as well as the UDAC throughout the development design process to discuss design concepts and site issues.

### Submission Requirements

The following drawings are required as part of all Special Use Permit applications for new construction and are requested as part of all Site Plan applications:

- Contextual site plan showing adjacent areas and buildings;
- Cross-section through the project showing the height relationship with adjacent buildings and buildings across the street; and
- Cross-section through the project showing the relationship to the sidewalk and street edge (also required for Site Plans with building heights over 50').

In addition to these materials, elevations of the proposed structure as well as a massing study, perspective or other three dimensional views are strongly recommended and may be required by the Director of Planning and Community Development.

For additional information concerning Site Plan and Special Use Permit submission requirements, see §11-406 and §11-503 of the Zoning Ordinance.

### Additional Requirements

In addition to addressing the Old Town North Urban Design Guidelines, buildings which are located within the Old and Historic Alexandria District (Fig. 4) must adhere to all requirements of the Board of Architectural Review (B.A.R.). Buildings which front North Washington Street must also adhere to §10-105(A)(3) of the Zoning Ordinance, "Additional Standards -- Washington Street".

Buildings on waterfront sites south of Pendleton Street must adhere to §10-105(A)(4),

"Additional Standards -- Potomac River Vicinity".

The additional standards for Washington Street and the Potomac River Vicinity take precedence over any other provision of the Zoning Ordinance. Applicants should also note that these standards specify application time frames as well as appropriate design solutions. Applicants are encouraged to follow the Board of Architectural Review Guidelines for *Buildings Along Washington Street* and *Buildings Along the Waterfront*, respectively, available from the Department of Planning and Community Development.

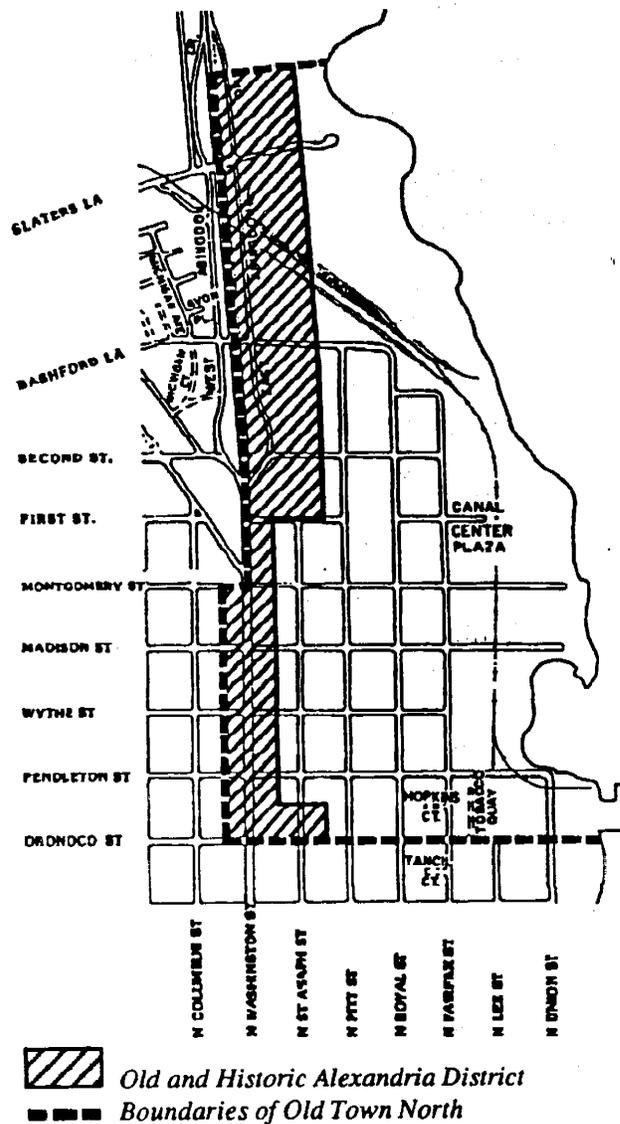


Fig. 4. Old and Historic Alexandria District in Old Town North

### *Development of the Guidelines*

The guidelines were developed by the urban design staff of the Department of Planning and Community Development in close collaboration with the Old Town North Urban Design Guidelines Committee and Old Town North business and property owners.

The guidelines will be reviewed by the Planning Commission and then considered by City Council for adoption by resolution as a policy document.

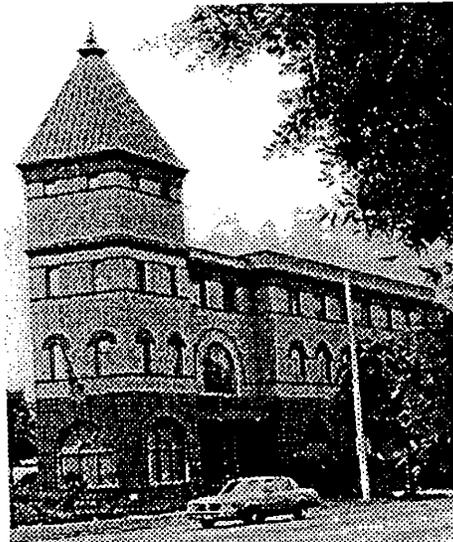
# Urban Design Guidelines

## Sense of Place, Arrival and Community

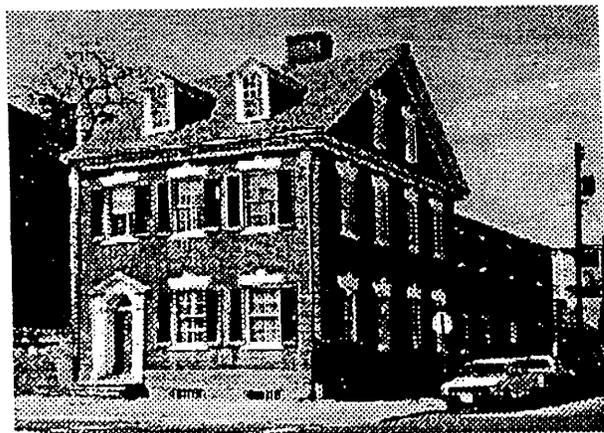
Old Town North is characterized by a great diversity of development, with variation in heights, building types, uses, site orientation, materials and styles. Currently, these disparate elements and building patterns do not provide a strong sense of community or physical identity for the Old Town North neighborhood. The guidelines seek to encourage a stronger sense of place by recognizing the need for continuity and compatibility throughout Old Town North. The guidelines also recognize the opportunities and challenges of special sites, such as the entrance to the City and along the waterfront.

### Gateway Sites

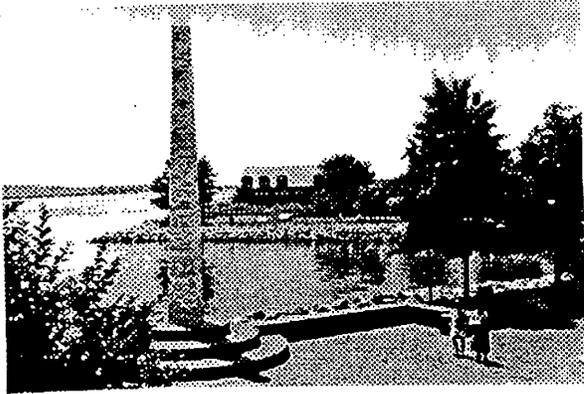
- Buildings on Washington Street north of Madison Street should create a sense of arrival into the city from the George Washington Memorial Parkway by incorporating "gateway" elements into the design of the building. Gateway elements might include towers, domes or other landmark features (Fig. 5).
- Buildings on Washington Street south of Madison Street should create a transition into the historic urban fabric of Old Town Alexandria. Transition strategies include paying particular attention to issues of scale, materials, architectural details and compatibility with existing historic structures along Washington Street (Fig. 6).



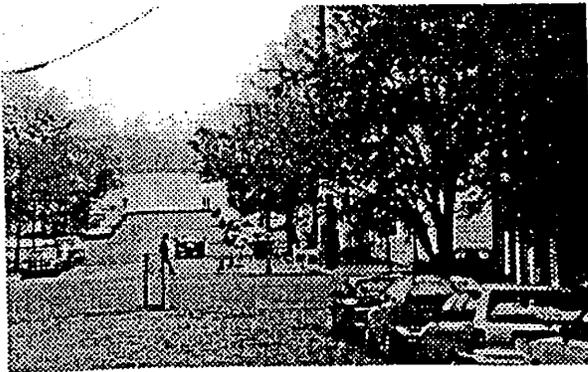
*Fig. 5. The tower at the corner of this building (950 North Washington) serves as a local landmark and reinforces a strong sense of arrival into the city.*



*Fig. 6. The Lee House on North Washington Street, built around 1800, demonstrates the scale, relationship to the street and type of construction associated with historic Old Town.*



*Fig. 7. The design of this waterfront site, Canal Center Plaza, creates a park around the site of the historic Alexandria canal, and provides public art, benches and a pedestrian path along the water's edge.*



*Fig. 8. Preserving the view of the river from the public right-of-way, shown here along Prince Street, maintains the image of Old Town North as a waterfront community.*

## **Waterfront Sites**

- The design of buildings should recognize the public visibility of the facade facing the water. Wherever possible, backs of buildings or rear yards should not face the water. If they must, they should be designed to relate to the waterfront in a manner similar to a front elevation.
- The design of buildings along the waterfront is encouraged to utilize architectural solutions which reflect the history and character of the waterfront heritage.
- The design of waterfront sites should enhance the public use and enjoyment of the waterfront area (Fig. 7).
- The view of the river on axis with the public right-of-way perpendicular to the river must be retained (Fig. 8).

## **General Issues**

- The tops of buildings should be designed in such a way as to contribute to an attractive skyline, by incorporating such elements as a strong cornice to cap off a building, or an ornamental roof on a mechanical penthouse. Purely utilitarian mechanical penthouses are discouraged.
- Architectural elements such as towers, domes or other landmark features are encouraged for a public building or for a private building in a prominent location, such as at a corner or a T-intersection.

## Orientation of Buildings to the Street

A fundamental principle of these guidelines is that new buildings must be oriented to the street. The pattern of buildings facing the street creates a built edge and a "wall" for the street; this wall provides a sense of enclosure for the pedestrian and physically defines the public realm. A consistent street wall creates a coherent urban environment and reinforces a sense of place.

### Site Orientation

- The building must be sited parallel to all street frontages.
- "Mews" or inward looking developments which are not also oriented to each street frontage are discouraged.
- Wherever possible, backs of buildings or rear yards should not face the street. If they must, they should be designed to relate to the street in a manner similar to a principal elevation.

### Frontage

- In general, buildings should include as much frontage as possible. Irregular spacing between buildings should be avoided or minimized at the setback line (Fig. 9).

### Setback

- Unless otherwise controlled by the Zoning Ordinance, the setback line should generally follow the existing setback pattern along the block face to help preserve the continuity of the street wall (Fig. 10).
- Buildings on corner lots should follow the existing setback pattern on both block faces.
- Where the building cannot maintain the existing setback pattern, architectural or landscape elements should be used to reinforce the existing setback line (Fig. 11).

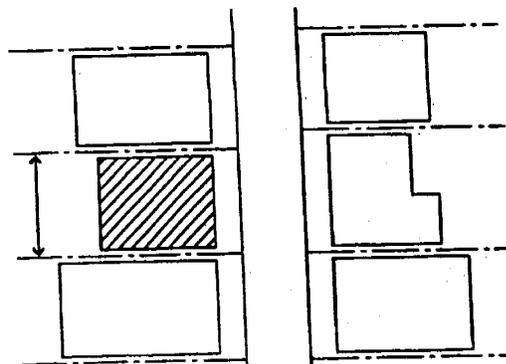


Fig. 9. Maximizing the building's frontage helps to maintain a consistent street wall.

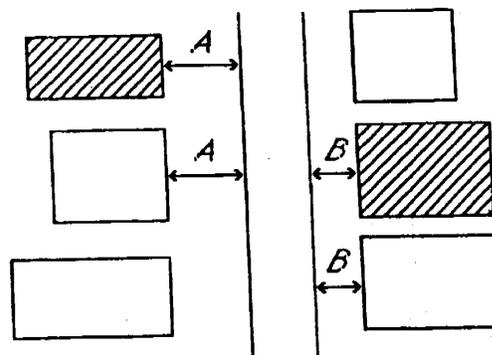


Fig. 10. Maintaining the setback pattern is critical to creating a consistent, orderly built edge.

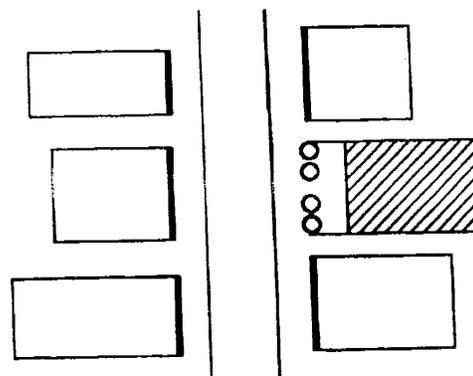


Fig. 11. Architectural or landscape elements (such as fences, walls or plant materials) can be used to help maintain the setback line when the building itself is set back.



*Fig. 12. The Riverport office building at North Pitt and Wythe Streets maintains a consistent streetwall along both sides of the corner, while the bays and corner tower add variety and richness to the streetscape.*

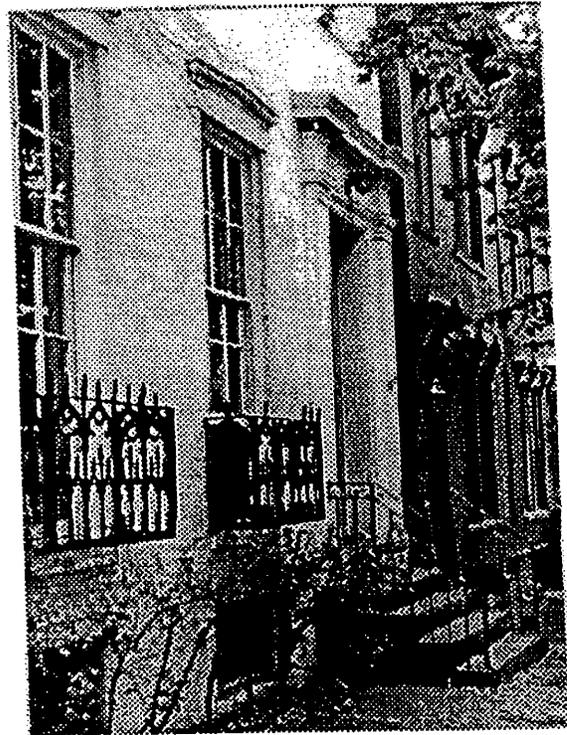
- If there is no existing setback pattern, the building should generally be built out to the property line to help create a street wall for at least the first two stories.
- In either case, the street wall does not need to be completely flat; architectural elements such as projecting or recessed bays or entrances can be used to provide visual interest and enliven the streetscape for the pedestrian (Fig. 12).

## Attractive Pedestrian Environment

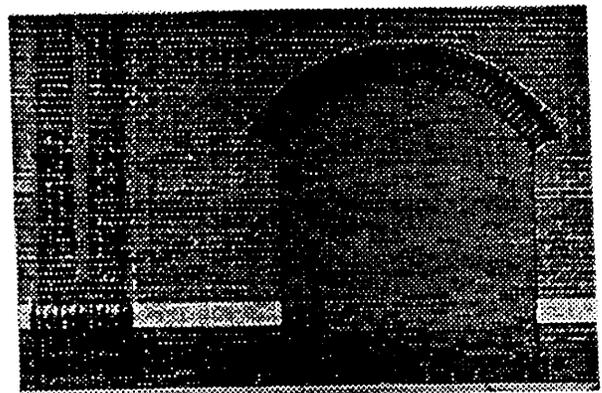
In a successful urban neighborhood, the design and location of each building, the types of activities and uses, and the components of the streetscape should encourage pedestrian use of the area. An environment attractive to pedestrians includes continuity and rhythm in the scale and setback of buildings, but also richness in the architectural elements and details of individual structures. A successful pedestrian environment also includes a sense of vitality, activity and security -- a place conducive to walking.

### *Architectural Details and Elements of Scale*

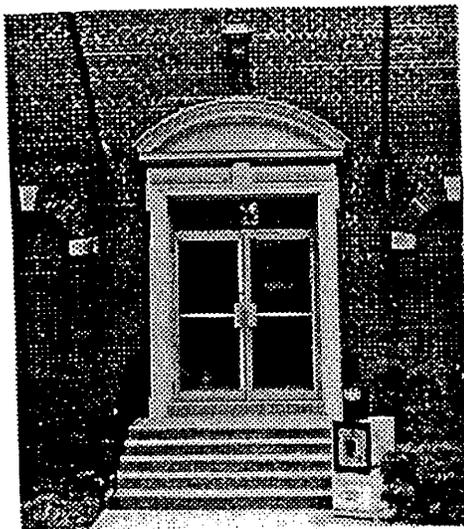
- At the pedestrian level, an emphasis on architectural details, quality of materials and articulation of the wall surface is strongly encouraged (Fig. 13).
- Large, blank facades should be avoided. In limited areas where solid treatment (no windows or doors) is unavoidable, articulation of the facade is essential. The scale of elements should be appropriate to a pedestrian (Fig. 14).
- Large developments should not appear monolithic or out of scale with neighboring buildings. Possible strategies to consider include:
  - expressing various uses differently, such as retail, residential, or office;
  - using a combination of different volumes or physical breaks within the massing;
  - massing larger portions of the building towards the interior of the site, away from the street edge; and
  - providing roof level interest, such as dormers, a variation in roof heights, or details at the cornice line.



*Fig. 13. The decorative railings, projecting stairs and other details of these Old Town townhouses along North Fairfax Street provide visual interest at the pedestrian level.*



*Fig. 14. The Giant Food Store on North St. Asaph Street has successfully provided elements of texture, scale and visual interest for the back wall of the store.*



*Fig. 15. The entrance to the Gazette Building provides a dominant element of human scale and visual interest, as well as a clear indication of the entry to the building.*



*Fig. 16. Awnings, such as for this gallery on North Fairfax Street, are encouraged to enliven the pedestrian environment.*

- An expression of the bay structure, typically every 20' to 40', is encouraged to provide visual interest and a sense of scale.

The bay structure can be expressed through design elements such as vertical articulation of the wall surface or the pattern of window openings.

In a townhouse development, however, each individual townhouse need not be expressed differently such as with a change of materials or setback.

### ***Building Entrances***

- The entry to the building should have a public presence on the street. Prominent entries are encouraged for architectural interest and as an element of scale (Fig. 15).
- Frequent building and shop entrances are encouraged; these create interest for passersby and encourage pedestrian activity.
- Awnings are encouraged for building entrances or first floor retail uses. These add color and interest to the streetscape and protection from the weather for the pedestrian (Fig. 16).
- Awnings along a block face should be coordinated in terms of type, materials, and location. Typically, single color, canvas type fabric awnings are recommended.
- Building lobbies should be considered as a transition area from public to private zones. They should be visible and immediately accessible from the public right-of-way.

## Streetscape Elements

- Sidewalks for North Washington Street are required to be city standard brick pavers.
- In other areas, sidewalk materials such as brick or precast pavers are encouraged. At a minimum, sidewalks should be city standard poured in place concrete.
- Street tree selection should match the predominant species on each block.
- Trees should be located on the street side of the sidewalk to provide the maximum protection for the pedestrian.
- Wherever possible, sidewalks should have a minimum clear pedestrian area of 6'; sidewalks greater than 15' overall are not generally encouraged (Fig. 17).
- Wherever possible, street trees should be planted 30' on center in a uniform manner (Fig. 17).
- Trees should generally be planted in pits rather than in strips to allow greater area for pedestrian activity, particularly where sidewalks are less than 6' wide. The standard dimension for a tree pit is 4' x 6'.

## Location of Uses

- Active uses, such as shops and restaurants, are specifically encouraged. These should be located at grade, and should be accessible directly from the public right-of-way.

Storefront openings, typically including large display windows, are particularly encouraged for these uses (Fig. 18).

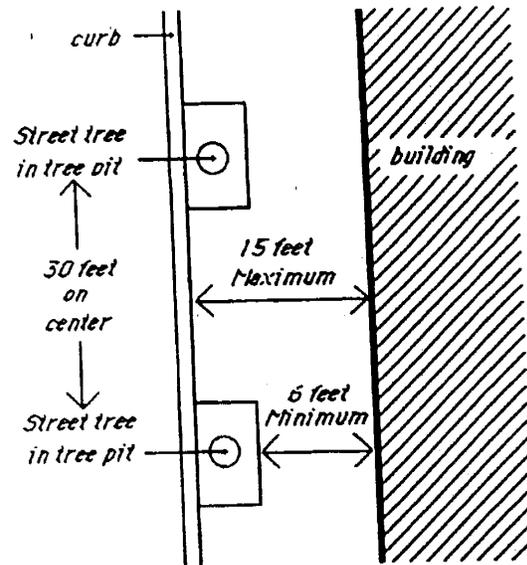


Fig. 17. The sidewalk needs to provide adequate room for pedestrians, but still maintain a sense of enclosure with the streetwall.

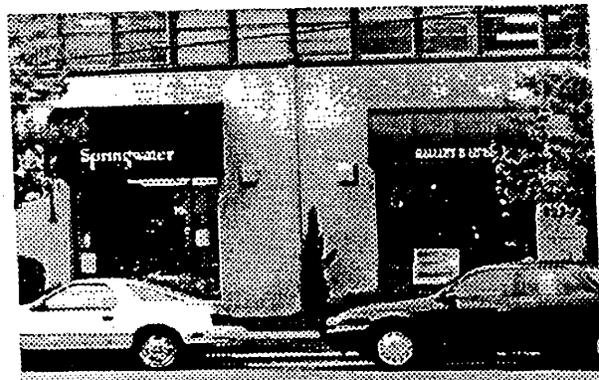


Fig. 18. Active uses such as these commercial storefronts on North Fairfax Street provide opportunities for street level activity and enhance the pedestrian experience.



*Fig. 19. Watergate of Alexandria, at North Royal and Second Streets, incorporates courtyards, gardens, and passageways throughout the interior of the project.*

## *Open Space*

- Space not occupied by buildings should not be considered left over, unused or negative space but should be carefully and purposefully designed.
- Wherever possible, usable open space should be incorporated into the design of the project with areas for sitting, viewing or strolling.
- Open spaces do not have to be large to be usable; garden views, through block walkways, interior courtyards, and pocket parks can all add to the physical and visual enjoyment of the area (Fig. 19).
- Commercial uses, such as restaurants, are encouraged to have an outdoor component, such as a dining area or courtyard.
- Pathways and through-block pedestrian connections are encouraged, especially for sites adjacent to open space or the waterfront.

## Compatible Development

Compatible development implies a harmonious juxtaposition of uses and forms. For Old Town North, compatibility is a critical concern in terms of protecting existing properties from the impact of new development, as well as insuring that each new project contributes to an overall sense of continuity and community.

### Parking and Service Areas

- Wherever possible, service areas and parking access should be confined to the rear or side of the building, out of view or screened from the public right-of-way by landscape or architectural elements. Parking areas should not be located in between the building and the public right-of-way (Fig. 20).
- Garage doors at grade level to individual townhouses are specifically discouraged adjacent to the public right-of-way.
- Grade level parking visible under a building is specifically discouraged, as are blank facades screening such parking areas (see also **Attractive Pedestrian Environment**, page 9).
- Additional curb cuts are prohibited in the Old and Historic Alexandria District (see § 9-108-403) and are discouraged in other areas in Old Town North.
- Screening is strongly recommended for existing parking adjacent to or visible from the public right-of-way, or for projects where underground or embedded parking is not required (see discussion on Urban Overlay District, page 5).

Recommended screening includes a landscape buffer zone with a low hedge or ornamental wall (under 42"); flowering trees located at 20' on center are recommended in addition to these materials. This buffer does not need to be totally opaque; partial visibility into the parking area is recommended for safety reasons. (Fig. 21).



Fig. 20. The chain link fence does not provide adequate screening for this parking area along North Pitt Street, which remains an eyesore for both pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

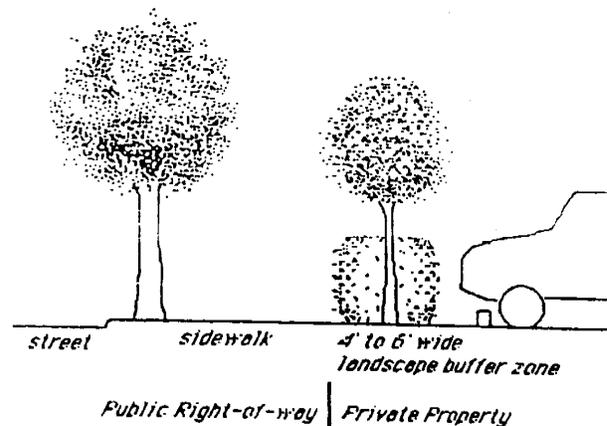


Fig. 21. A landscape buffer zone should be 4' to 6' in width on private property to provide an adequate visual barrier for exposed parking, in addition to any required street trees.

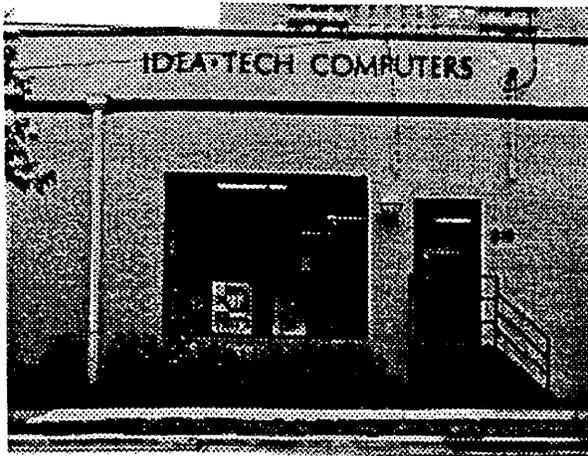


Fig. 22. This commercial sign along North Fairfax Street is easily read by pedestrian as well as vehicular traffic.



Fig. 23. Signs along this entire block face have been coordinated in terms of style and location.



Fig. 24. Hanging signs, typically suspended from a wall-mounted bracket, are particularly appropriate for areas of pedestrian activity.

## Signs

In addition to complying with the Sign Regulations in the Zoning Ordinance, § 9-108 - 403, signs in Old Town North should adhere to the following guidelines:

- The location, size and design of signs should be oriented to pedestrian traffic throughout Old Town North.
- Free standing signs are prohibited along Washington Street (per agreement with the National Park Service) and are discouraged in other areas in Old Town North.
- Building mounted signs should be incorporated into the design of the building, and should be in proportion with the size of the building.
- In general, building mounted signs should not be located above the second-story level of the building.
- Simple, readable designs are strongly encouraged. A maximum of three colors and two type faces are recommended (Fig. 22).
- The coordination of sign design among adjacent properties or commercial units within one property is encouraged (Fig. 23).
- Hanging signs, such as those found in the Old and Historic Alexandria District, are particularly encouraged at the pedestrian level (Fig. 24).
- Signs should not obscure other building elements such as windows, cornices or decorative details, but should relate in placement and size to these elements.
- If lighting is incorporated with the sign, the light should not extend beyond the sign to other portions of the building or adjacent properties.
- Individually illuminated letters are preferable to internally lit signs.

- Signs should be compatible with the surrounding area and streetscape in terms of size, color, materials, placement, and style.
- Corporate images (such as for fast food establishments) should be limited to signs and/or a portion of the facade, such as over the entry.
- Existing signs which possess architectural or historic importance should be preserved wherever possible.

### **Roofscapes**

- Mechanical equipment located on rooftops must be screened from view from adjacent buildings and from the street (see also § 6-403(B)).
- Satellite dishes or antennas should be as small as possible consistent with the requirements for reception and transmission.

Satellite dishes or antennas should be located on the least visually prominent area of a structure, consistent with functional requirements. If they are located on the roof, they should be mounted as far back from the street edge as possible to limit visibility from the public way (Fig. 25).

Satellite dishes or antennas should be painted to match the predominant color of the roof or adjacent wall surface, consistent with functional requirements (see also § 6-403(D)).

### **Materials**

- Buildings should be of those colors and materials which will blend in with the overall fabric of the neighborhood. Vinyl and aluminum siding are strongly discouraged.

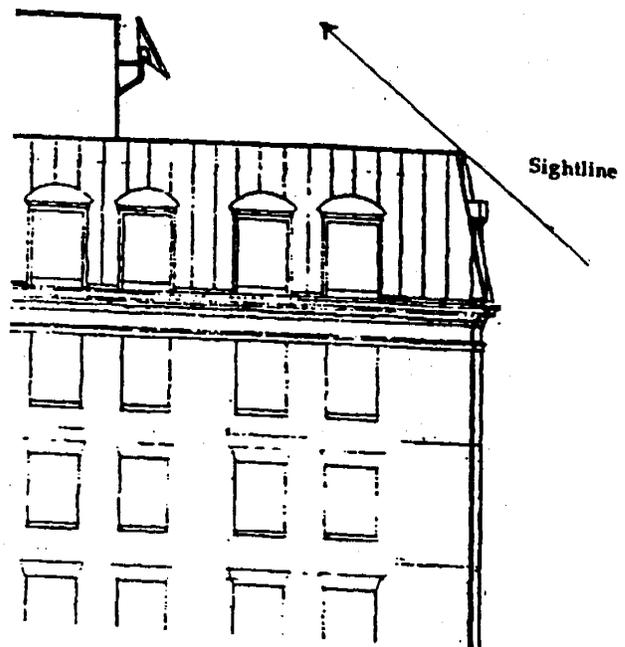
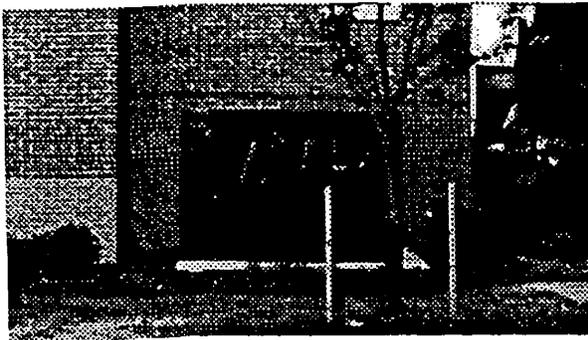


Fig. 25. This satellite dish is located well beyond the sight line from the public right-of-way.

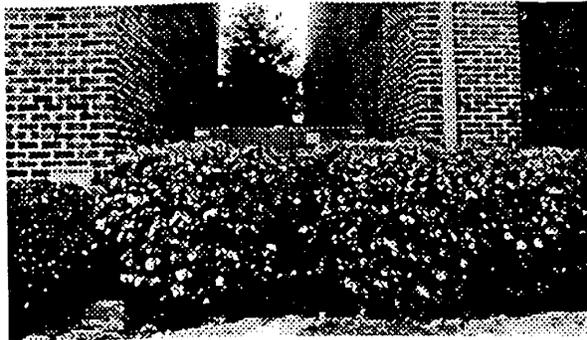
## ***Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities***

- Accessibility for persons with disabilities must be integrated into the design of the structure. For example, where parking and a public entrance is provided at the rear of a structure, both the front and rear entrances should be designed to be accessible.

For additional information, refer to the *Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities* issued by the U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (56 FR 35455) and the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code.



**Fig. 26.** This transformer is located behind the front building line but is not adequately screened.



**Fig. 27.** The shrubbery which screens this transformer provides a visual buffer while still allowing access as required.

## ***Solar Access***

- Where new buildings are constructed near existing residential buildings, the sunlight access of those residential buildings should be preserved wherever possible.

## ***Utilities***

- New construction should provide space for pad mounted transformers within the building footprint, if possible; otherwise, transformers should be located adjacent to an alley or at the rear of the property.

Where that is not feasible, transformers should be located behind the front building line (*i.e.*, not between the building and the right-of-way) if at all possible.

In all cases, transformers should be screened from the right-of-way by evergreen plantings or an opaque enclosure with an opaque gate (Fig. 26 and 27).