



## **DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR THE CONNECTICUT AVENUE COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR IN CLEVELAND PARK**

APRIL 2023

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Cleveland Park commercial district, along Connecticut Avenue NW, is an unusually intact example of a 1920s and 1930s low-scale, linear neighborhood retail commercial/apartment development. Most of the commercial buildings fronting Connecticut Avenue on the east and west sides between Macomb and Porter Streets are important contributing resources to the Cleveland Park Historic District.

The 1916 Georgian Revival firehouse at 3522 Connecticut Avenue—the oldest building in the Cleveland Park commercial strip—established the low scale of the commercial area along Connecticut Avenue. Soon to complement the firehouse were small shops and apartment buildings.

The first shop in Cleveland Park, the Monterey Pharmacy, opened in 1923 in the Monterey apartment building at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Porter Street. Within three years, the 3300 block of Connecticut Avenue was home to several grocery stores, two gas stations, a hairdresser, and a confectionery store. The 3300 block on the east side of Connecticut Avenue still exemplifies the typical 1920s low-scale and linear design of the commercial strip with its small, individual, and varied shops.

In 1930, architect Arthur B. Heaton and local developers Shannon and Luchs introduced a new and innovative commercial complex to Cleveland Park and the city with the “Park and Shop” at 3529 Connecticut Avenue (now popularly referred to as “Sam’s”). Designed to include shops, parking, a gas station, and an “automobile laundry” (carwash), the Park and Shop clearly recognized the importance of the automobile and the need to provide conveniences to the modern shopper.

Most of the buildings in the 3500 block of Connecticut Avenue, including the Park and Shop, reflect the traditional Colonial Revival-style aesthetic of the early twentieth century inspired by the 1916 firehouse. However, the 3400 block represents a different stylistic trend. There, a significant collection of commercial Art Deco buildings is bookended by Mihran Mesrobian’s 1939 Macklin apartment building on the south and the 1936 Uptown Theater on the north.

The Cleveland Park Historic District was included in the District of Columbia's Inventory of Historic Sites in 1986 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. The [National Register nomination form](#) for the Cleveland Park Historic District contains a detailed inventory and architectural descriptions of the buildings that are recognized as contributing resources to Cleveland Park's commercial corridor.

## **2. BUILDING TYPES OF THE COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR**

The commercial corridor's buildings generally fall into four categories: commercial buildings (most often storefronts), corner buildings, purpose-built buildings, and apartment buildings.

### **2.1 COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS**

One of the most distinctive and defining features of the commercial corridor is its one- and sometimes two-story storefront buildings dating from the early twentieth century. These are also found in many neighborhoods and central business district commercial "main street" corridors throughout the country.

Character-defining features of Cleveland Park's historic commercial buildings include:

- Low scale in height, mostly one- but sometimes two-stories, narrow in width and deep in length.
- Facades clad in brick or limestone, or in stucco with half-timber decoration.
- Stone and wood trim, including urns on rooflines, to define the rhythm of stores, accentuate their human scale, and provide texture to storefronts.
- Stone piers with classically detailed boundaries framing shops, thus making each a visually discrete entity and enhancing the rhythm along the street.
- Modillions under eaves emphasizing horizontal lines and defining the upper limit of the architectural form of buildings.
- Decorative pent roofs or roofs capped with stepped or shaped parapet walls.
- Art Deco motifs, including stainless steel decorative panels (at 3415 and 3417 Connecticut Avenue), glass brick (at 3433), and decorative carving in stone or concrete facade (at the Uptown Theatre and the stores at 3400 to 3408).
- Projecting and flat storefront windows made up of large plate glass atop polished stone or other masonry base, which provide human scale, enhance the rhythm of storefronts along the street, and display featured products and activity within.
- Tile and slate roofs, when visible from the street.

### **2.2 CORNER BUILDINGS**

Mixed-use, multi-floor buildings that include ground-level stores with apartments or offices above, provide anchors at major intersections such as Connecticut Avenue and Porter Streets. These include the 1922 Monterey Apartment building at 3530 that once housed the Uptown

Pharmacy on the street level, as well as the Ofty building at 3433–35, designed in 1936 to include a variety of occupants, including a restaurant.

## **2.3 PURPOSE-BUILT BUILDINGS**

Several buildings along the commercial corridor on Connecticut Avenue were designed and built for a particular use. These include:

- Firehouse (3522 Connecticut Avenue). The 1916 Georgian Revival firehouse is the oldest building in the commercial corridor and established its overall low scale.
- Park and Shop (3529 Connecticut Avenue). Architect Arthur B. Heaton's 1930 Georgian Colonial Revival-style Park and Shop, with its prominent copper-colored cupola, followed the low-scale precedent set by the firehouse and developer Harry Wardman's apartments at 3520 and 3500–3518. The southern section of the lot next to the Park and Shop's original plaza was designated to accommodate other businesses that originally consisted of a gas station and a car wash.
- Post Office (3430 Connecticut Avenue). The Classic Modern-style, one-story post office was constructed in 1941 on a vacant lot next to the Uptown Theater.

## **2.4 APARTMENT HOUSES**

- The first apartment house in Cleveland Park was a four-story, tan brick building with Georgian revival details. Built by Harry Wardman in 1919 at 3520 Connecticut Avenue, it followed the low-rise precedent established by the neighboring firehouse.
- Wardman's second project in 1921, 3500–3518 Connecticut Avenue and 2815–19 Ordway, took a decidedly different approach. The three-story red brick building was conceived of as a long, low block based on Colonial Georgian precedents and designed to appear as a series of individual rowhouses.
- The Macklin Apartment Building and Shopping Complex was designed by Mihran Mesrobian and completed in 1939. This Art Deco-style three-story building at 2911 Newark Street was built combining residential units on Newark Street with a one-story commercial strip along 3400 to 3408 Connecticut Avenue.

## **3. PRESERVATION REVIEW STANDARDS**

The 1987 National Register nomination form, with its identification and descriptions of the contributing resources to Cleveland Park's commercial corridor, serves as the standard for recognizing specific preservation standards and practices necessary for maintaining the elements that define its recognized historic character.

The *Design Guidelines for the Connecticut Avenue Commercial Corridor in Cleveland Park* are informed by the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, which set the standards for and continues to guide preservation practice in the United States. These standards also serve as the basis for the [D.C. Historic Preservation Office's design guidelines](https://planning.dc.gov/page/design-guidelines) (available at: <https://planning.dc.gov/page/design-guidelines>).

These guidelines also reflect recent policy established in the 2021 Comprehensive Plan and its Rock Creek West Area Element. Specifically, the Rock Creek West Area Element establishes policies to:

- Conserve the important historic resources of the neighborhoods west of Rock Creek that are identified in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites. Policy RCW-1.2.5: *Historic Resources*.
- Where more intense development is proposed in the vicinity of historic properties, adverse effects should be mitigated through careful siting, massing, and design to respect the character of the historic property and to provide appropriate transitions between the historic property and surrounding areas. Policy RCW-1.2.5: *Historic Resources*.
- Sustain the high quality of the Connecticut Avenue NW corridor. The positive qualities of the corridor, particularly its architecturally appealing, older apartment buildings; green spaces; trees; and walkable neighborhood shopping district, should be conserved and enhanced. Policy RCW-2.1.1: *Connecticut Avenue NW Corridor*.

#### **4. PRESERVATION PRINCIPLES AND GOALS**

The following design guidelines seek to recognize and preserve the important aspects of Cleveland Park's commercial corridor and its history. They are based on the following principles and goals:

- Preserving the variety of building types and character along the commercial corridor. Design for new construction, alterations, and additions to any of the historic buildings should be sensitive to the scale and character of the buildings and their historic streetscape context.
- Ensuring the distinction between the historic buildings and new construction to maintain a visual understanding of the evolution of the corridor from a mostly commercial area to a potentially more mixed-use residential and commercial area.
- Maintaining the historic low and horizontal sense of scale of the commercial corridor by ensuring that new construction respects the historic architectural context established by its landmarks and contributing buildings.
- Preserving and restoring storefront details where they remain, replacing missing details, and exposing original features when possible.

## **5. DESIGN GUIDELINES**

The intent of the following guidelines is to apply the afore referenced standards, principles, and goals to address applicable design options and issues specifically related to the Cleveland Park commercial corridor.

Design and preservation guidelines for the historic resources in the Cleveland Park commercial corridor generally fall under three categories: new construction, additions and alterations, and historic storefront façade preservation. These categories are fluid and can overlap substantially. Due to new height and density allotments under the Comprehensive Plans Future Land Use Map (FLUM), and the fact that there is not much opportunity for new or infill construction in the commercial corridor, most opportunities for construction are to add additional stories to the corridor's historic one-story storefront buildings.

Due to the degree of construction being proposed in the 2021 FLUM, with increases in scale, height, massing, and visibility, proposed additions do not represent the standard side or rear additions to existing buildings that are addressed in the Historic Preservation Office's (HPO) design guidelines. As a result, they should be considered as new construction, and therefore subject to many of the general principles and guidelines that apply to new construction.

### **5.1 NEW CONSTRUCTION**

Appropriate new construction design, whether a new building, addition, or alteration, is critical to preserving the character of the commercial corridor and should respect its architectural traditions while also relating to the present. It should be contextual and compatible in nature, respecting the character of surrounding buildings in terms of scale, massing, height, materials, and other character-defining elements.

New construction should also respect the landscape and enhance the overall street-level pedestrian environment. It should also enhance vitality along streetscapes and should showcase interesting and thoughtful contemporary design.

General parameters for new construction in the commercial corridor include:

**5.1.1** New construction should be compatible with the existing architectural environment without exactly duplicating existing buildings.

**5.1.2** Scale and form should be compatible with the height and depth of abutting and surrounding buildings.

**5.1.3** New construction should respect the massing of surrounding buildings, including the proportion of solid surfaces (walls) to voids (window and door openings).

**5.1.4** New construction should respect the orientation, rhythm, and setback of neighboring buildings.

**5.1.5** While new construction does not have to be the same height as existing buildings, it should be designed to be compatible with the height of its neighbors.

**5.1.6** The base height of a building's front wall at the street line should match those of neighboring/abutting buildings. Step backs should be used immediately above the established base height.

**5.1.7** Rooflines should be compatible in height with those found on surrounding buildings.

## **5.2 ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS TO HISTORIC BUILDINGS**

In historic districts, it is necessary to look beyond the building itself in evaluating an addition or alteration. The addition should be reviewed first as it affects the historic building itself, and second, as it affects the district in which it is located.

While there is no specific formula or prescription for designing a compatible new addition, any alteration or addition must strike a careful balance between differentiating new construction from old and achieving a degree of compatibility to maintain the original building's historic character and identity.

The size, scale, and massing of a new addition or alteration pertain to the addition's overall volume and three-dimensional qualities. These are critical elements for ensuring that a new addition is subordinate to the historic building, thus preserving its historic character.

Ideally, a compatible addition should be smaller than the historic building in both height and footprint, regardless of what zoning regulations may allow. Yet, depending on its location, an addition that is slightly taller or slightly larger than the historic building may be acceptable if it is visually subordinate to the historic building itself. One way of minimizing the impact of a new addition to an historic building is to offset it or step it back from the façade and mass of the historic building. At all times, historic viewsheds must be preserved.

General parameters for alterations and additions in the Cleveland Park commercial corridor include:

**5.2.1** Retain historic character-defining features when planning alterations and additions to a historic building.

**5.2.2** Design additions to be compatible with the existing historic building's massing, height, form, and scale.

**5.2.3** Place additions on secondary elevations whenever possible.

**5.2.4** While an addition does not necessarily need to be the same height as the existing building, it should be designed to be compatible with the height of the existing building and its neighbors. Compatible height also depends, in part, on the location and visibility of the addition.

**5.2.5** Additions should not be flush with any part of the original street-facing façade of a historic building.

**5.2.6** Roof-top additions should be designed so that their footprint is significantly smaller than the original building to avoid creating the appearance that the original building is simply an ornamental base or plinth for the floors above.

**5.2.7** A roof-top addition should be stepped back enough behind the existing wall plane and cornice so that it does not alter the historic character of the building and is as inconspicuous as possible from the street. Depending on the number of floors proposed, multiple step backs may be required.

**5.2.8** Roof-top additions on top of one-story storefront buildings should have a set back immediately above the cornice line.

**5.2.9** Rear additions should not project substantially beyond the extent of adjacent buildings of similar type.

**5.2.10** Side additions that obliterate or substantially obstruct side yards and block views from public space toward the interior of the block are discouraged.

**5.2.11** An addition may be contemporary in design, or it may replicate the historic character of the main building. Where an addition replicates the historic character of the main building, subtle architectural differences should be employed to clearly distinguish it as a later structure.

**5.2.12** Avoid incompatible architectural features in new additions, such as bay windows and balconies, when they are inconsistent with the character of the historic building.

## **6. COMMERCIAL BUILDING FACADES**

**6.1** The storefronts of the commercial buildings are also character-defining features. Thus, the configurations and materials of the elements comprising them, including ornamental surrounds, transoms, entrances, display windows, mullions, transom bars, and ornamental details, should be retained. Should any of these features be replaced, they should be replicated in kind to the greatest extent practical.

**6.2** Signage for storefronts was historically small and often united with surrounding shops. Many buildings have an area on the façade that was designed to hold signs. In remodeling, the sign should be kept within the building's architectural framework, maintaining the integrity, intended scale, and balance of the whole ensemble. Over-scaled signage can destroy the building's scale and the street rhythm. Large plaque signs cover up architectural detail, thereby damaging the building's integrity.

**6.3** Canopies and awnings that can provide shelter from the sun and rain and space for smaller-scale advertising for the business within should be designed in scale with the building and to avoid obscuring such architectural details as transom windows.

**6.4** Though not a historical feature, sidewalk cafes can enhance street life when their design is compatible and in scale with the adjacent building and does not obscure its view from the street or sidewalk.

For more information on specific design aspects regarding historic storefront details, see the DC Historic Preservation Office's [\*Design Guidelines for Historic Commercial Buildings\*](https://planning.dc.gov/node/594302) (available at <https://planning.dc.gov/node/594302>).