**Compatible New Construction: Context Sensitive Design**

The term “context sensitive design” became common in the design of new roads during the last few decades. The simple shift from designing based on common “best” design solutions to considering that roads should fit the environments for which they are being built was framed as “context sensitive design.”

The field of historic preservation has long used this concept as well but uses the term “compatible.”  
This concept is articulated in guidance from the National Park Service in the use of the Secretary of Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. The Standards for Rehabilitation are the basis for the Design Standards for the Browne’s Addition Historic District. This guidance uses the term “compatible” in both the technical sense – as in not introducing incompatible materials – as well as in the visual sense. The guidance notes that compatibility can be achieved with various design solutions.

It is important to note that “compatibility” is not comparability. Compatibility can be defined in terms of the absence of conflict or problems; in more casual and visual terms, it can mean being a good neighbor in that a building “fits in.” Comparability is a very close state of compatibility, in that the two things have enough in common that they can be compared meaningfully. The common phrase “don’t compare apples to oranges” refers to real differences in them. Apples are not oranges, but they are compatible in the fruit bowl. Compatibility may incorporate comparability – which in the built environment can be taken to some form of replication.

This framework for designing new construction in Browne’s Addition is firmly grounded in compatible contemporary design: design that is clearly of the 21st century and is not imitative, yet fits into the historic district as context compatible design. In order to be open to creative compatible design solutions, the framework is open-ended rather than prescriptive. Architects propose new designs and the framework shapes the conversations about the compatibility and appropriateness of that design. The framework is intended to not favor New Urbanism inspired traditional contemporary design nor commercial-driven contemporary design – even as it does rely on long-held principles of building design. It is informed by the concepts of Form-Based Zoning, but is not as prescriptive as that type of framework. The framework relies most heavily on the concept of invention of a building type of style, which is explained below.

Approximately 25 percent of the properties within the Browne’s Addition Historic District are non-contributing and these properties might be redeveloped. There are additional redevelopment sites outside the boundaries of the district within the neighborhood that will introduce more change but will not be formally considered within this framework. The built environment in the historic district will change over time, even as the historic, contributing buildings in the historic district will provide the underlying historic character for the residential area.

The overarching intent of this framework for new construction is that new buildings in the district do not diminish the historic character of the neighborhood. Compatible, context-sensitive design avoids that effect. In this way, the changing residential needs and desires of Spokane’s residents will continue to be met.

**Framework for Compatible, Context-Sensitive Design in Browne’s Addition**

This framework – which constitute the standards for new construction – has a different format and way of use than traditional historic district standards.

Be sure to read the introductory material to understand the nature of the framework, the open-ended nature of it, and the various opportunities to achieve compatible new design. Be prepared to discuss your project with the Historic Preservation Officer and Commission Members in terms of this framework.

**Introduction**

**Design Review Basics**

**Individual Review and No Standard Solutions**

The very nature of context-sensitive, compatible design in Browne’s Addition where streetscapes and residential building types are varied, means that a proposal approved for one location may well not be compatible and appropriate in another location.

Each proposal will be considered for its specific location only.

There should be no expectation that a proposal approved for one location will be approved for another.

**Reliance on Design Strategy: Invention within a building type of style**

Of several broad strategies for new infill design – replication, abstract reference, juxtaposition, and invention within – the approach of re-invention within echoes a “traditional with a twist” approach to design. It is coherent design, not a jumble of various elements from building types and styles. For instance, it is the provision of a sheltered entrance but does not necessarily use a traditional projecting entrance porch. It has recognizable forms and building elements, but does not attempt to replicate.

The open-ended structure of this framework and scorecard evaluation allows the architect to decide where to make strong references to the underlying type or style – and were to include more contemporary expression. The results of this approach have the visual references necessary for compatibility, but avoid attempts to copy the past and the mixing of disparate elements.

Utilizing abstract reference and juxtaposition as a component of a compatible design – rather than the design strategy itself – incorporates more opportunities for variety into the framework for design and achieves compatibility.

**New Infill Construction Initiative**

New construction in Browne’s Addition will be in the broad category of Infill Development for which the City of Spokane Planning Department is providing general guidance for in the interest of increased density in existing residential areas. Those proposing new construction should be aware of this and other additions to the Zoning Code.

However, the Browne’s Addition Historic District Design Standards supersede any guidance in general standards, as new construction in a historic district must be compatible and this may require some adjustments. These standards are not meant to avoid additional density through infill development. Rather they shape how such development can occur and be compatible with the district.

If there are differences in guidance for setbacks, allowable height, building types, etc. the guidance in this Framework supersedes that in the more generic (Infill Construction zoning standards).

**City Zoning for Browne’s Addition**

Plan new development that requires no variances from the HDR zoning requirements that cover most of Browne’s Addition and others that may overlay a redevelopment site.

HDR zoning has a maximum height for buildings. This maximum height is compatible for *most* locations within the district. The minimum building setbacks may not be in alignment with patterns in the historic district. Use context analysis and conform to setbacks on the block. Standard maximum lot coverage may also not be appropriate for compatible scale and siting of new buildings.

**Using Precedent and Patterns in Browne’s Addition**

Browne’s Addition Historic District has some of the most varied streetscapes found in areas protected as historic districts. While this variety in the built environment allows for a somewhat wide range of compatible new construction, it does not mean that there are not patterns in scale, siting, design, and use of materials that provide context for the design of new buildings. This variety, though, does mean that several types of multi-family building types are appropriate for new construction in Browne’s Addition.

Tips for Success:

Avoid disregarding any aspects of this framework, such as the three-tiered context analysis, as such an approach may delay your project or introduce unrealizable expectations for approval of new construction.

Avoid searching for obscure elements to justify what is proposed.

Use the opportunity for compatible design as one that allows opportunity for design, rather than just limitations.

Propose new construction that you can discuss in terms of this framework.

Respect the efforts of the residents of Browne’s Addition who worked to establish the historic district.

**Using the Framework**

The following sets of statements regarding designing for compatibility correspond directly with the Compatibility of Design Rating framework that Commission Members and others will use to assess the compatibility of the proposed design. The Rating document follows this section.

**The statements suggest ways that compatible, context-sensitive design can be achieved.**

**The statements are not a checklist or prescriptive set of standards to be met with each project.**

**The architect is free to choose from among the elements that will ensure compatibility while introducing some differentiation.**

Hence, the statements about compatibility are not requirements for each design.

This different approach is intentional and should be understood as a framework and assessment tool, rather than requirements.

**District Basics**

The district is the resource and all new buildings shall not adversely affect the historic character of the district.

The streetscape is the experienced character and the basis of compatibility because character is varied and local.

Existing buildings address sloped lots and relationship between the ground story and sidewalk elevations in various ways without calling attention to or introducing complicated solutions

Compatibility in design is a visual characteristic.

Compatible design is an achievable design challenge that requires some comparability.

Height, color, materials, and use of materials all matter and shall be carefully considered as compatibility is the goal.

**Section 1: Context Analysis**

**Project Location Analysis:**

Use three tiers for the context analysis for new construction:

The historic district Character Area:

Analyze patterns and unifying aspects

Note how diversity is present and absent

Facing blockfronts of building site:

Analyze building types and patterns of location on both blockfronts

Diagram setbacks and spacing to insure compatibility

Depict streetspaces as elevations and in plan to note height, materials, and site access for vehicles

Adjacent buildings:

Establish compatible setback and height

Through elevations: indicate floor heights and entrances and window placement

The district has five Character Areas for Context Analysis:

Northwest:

Larger residential buildings are located on east-west streets

Smaller buildings are located on the smaller lots on north-south streets and areas with more consistent placement of smaller houses.

Some areas have very deep setbacks for buildings that furthers a park-like setting

Northeast:

Substantial buildings are closely spaced on narrow, deep lots on many blocks

Lively mix of apartment buildings and single-family buildings

Setback depths vary by blockfront

Park West:

Area historically had large properties

Setback depths generous for single-family houses, less deep for apartment buildings

Park East:

Area has distinct sub-areas of smaller residences and large apartment buildings

Setback depths varies by blockfront

Park South:

Subareas of substantial houses, modest houses and apartment areas

Setback depths vary by blockfront

**Section 2: Urban Form Analysis**

Compatibility in the urban form and design of a new building within the Browne’s Addition Historic District relies primarily on these factors. Measures of compatibility for each aspect are noted.

**Streetscape factors**: **siting and setback**

Siting buildings to hold common set-backs from the public sidewalks to maintain the historic urban form or the district

Avoiding encroaching on the public sidewalk with a shallow front lawn or no lawn

Maintaining the relationships between building and lot size, lot coverage

Maintaining common rhythm of building placement and distance between buildings, at least on one side

Maintaining ground story at common elevation of blockfront

Avoiding use of unnecessary terraces to raise the lawn above adjacent ones or excavation to create walk-out basements

Designing for minimal presence of underground parking and other modern elements of multi-family buildings, such as an amenity deck

Orienting buildings and human access to the street while providing provision for automobiles at the rear of the property

**Scale, Massing and Height**:

**Scale**

Working within high-density residential zoning, adjusted for neighborhood patterns, to maintain compatibility in scale

Referring to the scale of historic buildings through the ratio of footprint to height of historic buildings

Designing for comfortable scale with the human body

**Massing**

Referring to the massing of historic apartment buildings and multi-family buildings that are relatively simple arrangements of volumes with rectangular footprints for new multi-family buildings

Recognizing that the complexity of massing, forms, and use of materials for historic Queen Anne style residences is particular to that building type

Incorporating vertical and horizontal plane breaks in massing as the means for subtle modulation of form and justification for change in materials

Using inset and projecting balconies and porches for providing semi-private exterior space

Using massing that avoids the unmodulated box and so much variation in massing that the eye finds no place to rest

Using pitched roofs over occupiable space (not false fronts) in multi-family dwellings that appear to be townhouses with individual entrances

Using flat roofs for buildings that appear as apartment buildings only

**Height**

Avoiding significant differences in height of closely positioned buildings: no more than a two-story difference without some stepping up of height or other means to limit the effect of the difference

Limiting the footprint of a one-story building to that of a small single-family house

Using comparable floor heights so that windows and other horizontal elements have some visual consistency in the streetscape

**Provision for automobiles**

Providing access via minimal curb access and narrow driveways to parking at the rear or side of the lot

Incorporating parking into the rear lower story of a building

Limiting paved areas to minimum required for access and parking

Limiting interaction between vehicles and pedestrians

**Section 3. Design Component Analysis**

**General: Orientation, Design Quality, Presence**

Orienting the building to the street with visible human entrances and windows facing the street or near the façade if a side entrance

Using traditional architectural design principles as detailed below

Considering the overall presence of the building in the streetscape and its balance of compatibility and differentiation

Designing a building based on authentic use patterns, i.e. new residential buildings should appear as residential ones and not new converted industrial lofts on the exterior

Ensuring building does not use differentiation to call undue attention to itself and introduce visual dissonance in the streetscape

Ensuring that a comparable level of detail in massing, façade design, and use of color for visual compatibility

Ensuring that district residents could readily see visual compatibility

Using a form that refers to the common presence of porches as semi-private space

Paying sufficient attention to 360 degree design by continuing use of materials or introducing complementing materials, continuing some design element, and avoiding blank or barely developed highly-visible walls

**Use of façade materials**:

Traditional building materials: brick veneer, lapped siding, stucco,

Traditional building materials do not imitate others with false wood grain or appear in panels with joints

Using materials like those on historic buildings in the district

Using material of similar perceived quality as historic materials and avoiding imitate materials that express lack of quality and low cost

Using materials in the same manner as used on historic buildings

Maintaining a hierarchy of primary and secondary materials with primary material consisting of 70% of the facade

Using constructional logic in use of materials with lighter materials above heavier ones

Changing materials only at vertical plane breaks or horizontal story breaks, or for projecting bays

Using materials with small variations, such as siding width

Using primary materials on all facades of a building or following historic pattern in use of

masonry of secondary materials for elevations and rear facades

Avoiding using materials traditionally not used on residential buildings, such as those considered to be appropriate for industrial or commercial building use

**Use of secondary façade materials and accent materials**

Traditional accent materials

stone, brick, textured and colored stucco, architectural metals

Being guided by the “rule of five” to avoid too many materials and visual clutter

Three materials found in walls, windows and roof

Use of no more than two additional ones: a second wall material or accent material in railings or porch elements

Using materials like those on historic buildings in the district

Limiting total number of materials to no more than five

Using vertical plane and story breaks as locations for material changes

Using high-quality accent materials

Using window materials that are traditional materials: wood and metal

**Use of Color**

Using primary materials with traditional natural mineral-based colors

Using color in the manner used in historic buildings, with non-traditional colors used primarily as accents

Designing with one color dominant

Using color of similar value and saturation for building and as found in permanent colors (brick and stone) in the context

**Façade design**

Using elements of similar scale as buildings in facing blockfronts context

Using degree of articulation similar to buildings in facing blockfronts context

Avoiding copying historic styles and mixing of disparate elements

Using constructional logic in dimensions of elements

Using fenestration logic based on interior and avoiding eccentricity

Using traditional approach to entrance design by

Placing individual entrances in multi-family buildings oriented to the street and clearly evident as the main entrance to each unit

Placing entrances into a building with multiple units oriented to the street and be clearly evident as the main entrance for residents and visitors

Using design principles to keep entrances in scale with the human body and the building.

**Fenestration** is a collective term that refers to the arrangement of windows and doors on the elevations of a building.

This arrangement includes the size(s), positioning, grouping, and types of windows.

Fenestration can be simple with repetition forming continuity

Fenestration can be more complex with some windows being larger or more prominent than others

**Basics: Architectural Design**

Incorporating traditional architectural design principles

Order and unity in visual aspects of the design

Proportion and rhythm establish pleasing relationships

Hierarchy and balance or symmetry Balance

Use visual hierarchy in massing and fenestration

Use symmetry or balanced asymmetry to establish balance

Proportion

Design with consideration to relationships of the parts to each other and to the while

Design so the visual relationship between all parts is harmonious and in scale

Proximity

Design so that building elements that are close together complement each other rather than compete for attention

Similarity

Design to avoid too many textures, shapes, colors and other characteristics that are perceived as non-similar and introduce jarring visual clutter or busy-ness

Continuation

Design so that elements have a sense of order and continuation, using subtle changes and rhythm to engage the eye

Avoid lack of continuation and coherence with spotty placement and non-similar elements

**Recognizing the effort**

Designing new buildings for locations in historic district is a specific design problem that some developers welcome, and some do not.

The Compatibility of Design Rating framework includes two opportunities for recognizing the efforts made to achieve context-sensitive design:

Sometimes a design does not meet certain expectations but feels “right” for the location

Some designs convey extra attention to the immediate context yet are contemporary in design

Some designs convey reinvention of a common building type or style