

2011

Downtown DeKalb – Design Guidelines for New  
Construction



Re:New DeKalb

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## DEKALB, ILLINOIS --- A SNAPSHOT

The City of DeKalb, Illinois is an hour from downtown Chicago and less than an hour from major cities Rockford, Aurora, Naperville, and Elgin. Despite DeKalb's proximity to greater Chicagoland, the City remains 'apart' and maintains its unique character – a thriving University community with rural and urban roots. DeKalb's rich history captures the spirit of 'days gone by', while embracing an exciting future as the western anchor of the I88 Technology & Research corridor, and home to one of the nation's premier regional University's. DeKalb's historic downtown includes numerous historic structures, and boasts abundant shopping, dining, and entertainment options.



*DeKalb's historic downtown --- 1906; looking west, NIU's Altgeld Hall in background.*



*Downtown DeKalb construction, summer 2010.*



*Completed streetscape, DeKalb.*

Home to Northern Illinois University, the City of DeKalb is truly a 'communiversity', fostering an environment of cooperation and achievement. The City of DeKalb has evolved from an agriculturally based manufacturing center to a bustling City which is recognized for a commitment to economic and environmental sustainability, a variety of cultural and recreational opportunities, and regional leadership in education and medicine.

## BACKGROUND

In 2006, the City of DeKalb began an ambitious downtown redevelopment process, meant to revitalize DeKalb's central business district and the surrounding neighborhoods. Accordingly, a comprehensive downtown redevelopment plan was finalized and approved by the DeKalb City Council in 2008. The plan, the "Downtown DeKalb Revitalization Plan", received

broad community support. The plan's vision is to restore downtown DeKalb as the centerpiece of the community. To accomplish this, the City of DeKalb's Revitalization Task Force outlined two objectives that must be met;

- ✓ Improve downtown DeKalb's image.
- ✓ Provide a variety of downtown destinations to serve the community and attract visitors.



*Aspects of the Downtown DeKalb Revitalization Plan, streetscape and looking west on Locust St.*

To achieve these objectives, a set of practical design guidelines for new construction in downtown DeKalb will encourage sustainable (pedestrian friendly, responsible) and attractive (aesthetically pleasing) development, while preserving 'main street' DeKalb's rich architectural heritage. These guidelines will promote aesthetic improvements that will benefit citizens and businesses alike – while assuring that downtown DeKalb maintains its status as one of the region's retail centers well into the future.

## **PURPOSE**

These guidelines will establish preferred standards and a general design framework for new construction in downtown DeKalb, Illinois. They will guide City officials, developers, business leaders, and citizens in making land use and land management decisions. The guidelines are for general use only – individual projects will be reviewed and considered on their own merits, as appropriate, by the City of DeKalb's Design Review Committee.

It is the general purpose and intent of the downtown DeKalb design guidelines for new construction to foster the use and development of land in an orderly manner, by both private and public interests, with special consideration given to the appearance of the community as a result of such development.

## **GOALS**

DeKalb's downtown is a diverse collection of historic structures, modern buildings, public spaces, streets, parking lots, alleys, and vacant lots. The downtown DeKalb design guidelines provide guidance for new structures on properties within the Central Business District. A separate, but complimentary set of guidelines has been created for the redevelopment

(rehabilitation, additions) of existing buildings. The downtown DeKalb design guidelines for new construction are not a rigid set of rules. They do not require that new structures be built in accordance with one specific ‘look’ and style, or to mimic a historic period. Rather, their purpose is to;

- ✓ *Address* the design of all new structures in downtown DeKalb – including commercial, office, industrial, residential, and institutional uses;
- ✓ *Facilitate* innovative and creative building design and development while preserving DeKalb’s identity and unique architectural tradition;
- ✓ *Ensure* each new downtown DeKalb construction project is judged according to consistent criteria;
- ✓ *Provide* a flourishing, active, and pedestrian-oriented central business district to the citizens of DeKalb.
- ✓ *Produce* more complete applicant submissions, resulting in an improved and streamlined design review process.

### **AUTHORITY**

It should be emphasized that these design guidelines are for general guidance only. All new construction in the City of DeKalb will be subject to the appropriate City Code and ordinances, and the standard specifications for design and construction except as described in these guidelines. The developer is responsible for all applicable entitlements and permits. New development in downtown DeKalb that does not conform to an existing zoning classification might be processed as a planned development.

### **PART I. LAND USE & DENSITY**

The City of DeKalb’s central business district is one of the region’s retail cores. Consequently, land uses in the downtown should focus on retail and commercial uses, especially at the pedestrian level. New downtown construction may also include mixed-use retail, residential, institutional, hotel, and office space.



*A mixed-use development.*

Downtown residential space creates a livable urban atmosphere while encouraging residents, University students and faculty to live and work in downtown DeKalb. Potential residential developments include high-end rental units, condominiums, and single-family homes (rowhouses, etc.). Platting waivers, including (but not limited to) lot areas, widths, and required yards, may be granted to create zero lot line units (rowhouses), unit lots, or other needs to facilitate attractive development that complies with these guidelines.

Finally, new buildings in ‘transitional zones’ (commercial development adjacent to residential) should act as a buffer between the two zones, sensitive to each.



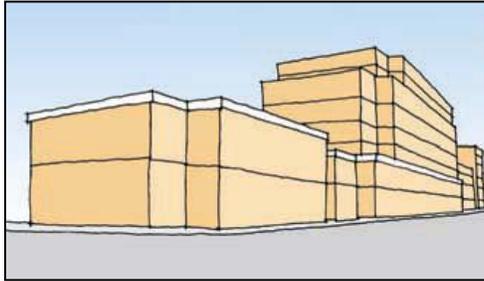
*Mixed-use development, first-floor commercial with upper-level residential.*

## **PART II. CONTEXT**

### **1. Design Context & Scale**

- a. Enhancing Scenic Viewpoints; new structures should frame and enhance scenic views and visual pathways. Visual pathways are spaces that frame views from one location to another. An example is the visual pathway looking west on E. Lincoln Highway, with downtown DeKalb’s structures in the forefront and the Holmes Student Center tower in the background.
- b. Structures should frame City streets and pedestrian walkways.
- c. New buildings should be designed in scale with the rest of downtown. Heights and widths should relatively match surrounding structures.
- d. New buildings might uphold any significant or historic architectural context of the neighborhood or adjoining properties. If a particular style or context is not established in the area, the new development might pioneer an innovative character – setting the tone for adjacent structures.
- e. Corner lots are important properties because of their visibility. New buildings on corner lots should be oriented to the corner and street fronts. Parking and other amenities should be located away from the street corner.
- f. A variety of sizes and massing are encouraged within a new development.
- g. Large buildings should be broken into multiple buildings, if possible, or into smaller building massing elements through the use of varied façade planes, an upper story setback, windows on front elevation, etc. in order to reduce the apparent size of the structure.
- h. New downtown DeKalb structures should maintain a continuous building street frontage. Breaks should be provided for only pedestrian access or public plazas.
- i. New structures should create a ‘sense of enclosure’ by maintaining density.
- j. Building setbacks to adjacent streets should be minimal. If internal drives are utilized, setbacks should be minimized wherever possible.

- k. Finally, new development in downtown DeKalb should consider effects on shading and views.



*Varied rooflines, setbacks, and effective massing techniques help the largest structure ‘blend’ into its surroundings.*

## 2. Rooflines

- a. An important aspect of new construction in an urban ‘main street’ environment are rooflines and roof style. New development in downtown DeKalb should include hip, gable, or combination hip/gable roofs – as well as flat or mansard roofs. Roofline treatments are encouraged.



*New structures downtown should continue DeKalb’s rich architectural tradition (Parapets, roofline treatments, cornices).*

- b. An appropriate building plan is one that is respectful of the predominant roof type of adjacent properties.
- c. Ridgelines should be offset at least one (1) foot, either horizontally or vertically, for every thirty-five (35) feet of ridgeline length to correspond with the typical width of adjacent properties.
- d. Rooftop mechanical units should be hidden from view using parapets or similar roofline treatments. Metal screening systems are not encouraged.
- e. The rear of roofline parapets should include architectural elements matching the front of the structure and parapet.
- f. The appearance of ‘false roofs’ should be avoided.

### **Sustainability Tip;**

Going green? Consider a ‘green roof’ (rooftop vegetation) to reduce stormwater runoff.

## PART III. BUILDING COMPONENTS

### 1. Building Materials

- a. Buildings should use high-quality, durable, and authentic materials (brick, stone, stucco, etc.), consistent with DeKalb's historic structures. Preferred building materials are;
  - ✓ Brick
  - ✓ Stone
  - ✓ Glass
  - ✓ Wood
  - ✓ Stucco
- b. Primary materials (brick, glass, stone, etc.) should comprise at least 75% of the building's façade. Accent materials (wood, stucco, etc.) should account for 10-25%.
- c. Building materials should be consistent on all sides of a structure.
- d. Materials should create texture and relate to human scale. The use of dull materials is discouraged.
- e. The use of synthetic finishes, such as vinyl siding and faux brick or faux stone is discouraged.
- f. New downtown DeKalb developments might take advantage of locally produced building materials (local granite, limestone, etc.).

#### Sustainability Tip;

Utilize building materials which are composed of recycled materials or manufactured from rapidly renewable plants. Recycled bricks from demolished buildings might also be utilized.

### 2. Windows & Storefronts

- a. At the ground level, 50% of the façade should typically be transparent (for retail uses). For other uses (institutional, office), a typical minimum is 35%.
- b. Blank, windowless walls should be avoided on the front of the building, or on any side that faces a public right of way. Where blank walls cannot be avoided, changes in plane, building materials, color, or additional landscaping shall be utilized to minimize the visual effect of the blank wall.



*Transparent new storefront.*

- c. Glass at the ground level should allow for clear views into the structure. Painted, tinted, or mirrored glasses are discouraged at the pedestrian level.
- d. Repeating window patterns are encouraged, creating a sense of visual rhythm and symmetry.
- e. Detailed treatments (molding, framing, etc.) for windows at ground level are encouraged.
- f. Storefronts should be well-defined and transparent. Glass storefront facades should encourage the pedestrian's view of displayed products.
- g. Lighted storefronts are encouraged. Lighting should emphasize items displayed, and be hidden from public view.
- h. Storefront window signage must conform to the City of DeKalb's sign ordinance.

### 3. Building Facades & Architectural Details

- a. New downtown DeKalb facades are encouraged to emphasize symmetry (replication of elements from a centerline), rhythm (using materials and windows to create a 'grid'), and balance (for example, using a clock/tower feature to offset a 'heavy' side).
- b. Building facades should include a base/middle/cap.
  - ✓ A base consists of 'heavy' material (stone) and anchors the building to the streetscape (often a knee wall).



*Knee wall.*

- ✓ The middle is usually repetitive (symmetrical window/stone features), connecting the base to the cap. The middle makes up the majority of the building's height.
  - ✓ The cap is the building's roofline.
- c. Color schemes should 'bring together' the building/development as a cohesive unit.
- d. Four-sided architecture is strongly encouraged.
- e. Ground level window and door design should match that of the overall building. The windows and doors might include details that draw pedestrians into the storefront.
- f. Certain architectural elements might be included on the building's façade that enhance the pedestrian experience, these include; patterned concrete, stone, brick, masonry banding, horizontal stone, sculptures, mosaics, and other artwork.
- g. Accessory buildings and equipment should be designed of similar or complementary materials as the primary structure.



*New development with attractive architectural detailing, awnings, and consistent signage.*

#### **4. Screening**

- a. Rear service areas should incorporate four-sided architecture.
- b. When service areas (such as trash receptacles) cannot be screened entirely from the public view, they should be minimal and as attractively designed as possible. Ideas for screening include;
  - ✓ Masonry screening wall
  - ✓ Landscaping
  - ✓ Planters
- c. Fencing (chain link, etc.) is generally discouraged as a service area screening method.



*An attractively-screened trash enclosure in DeKalb's Van Buer Plaza*



*Masonry screening wall.*

#### **5. Entryways**

- a. Building entrances in downtown DeKalb should be oriented toward the street or a public space. A welcoming entryway will enhance the pedestrian experience.



*Residential entryway.*

- b. Entry points should be easily accessible from parking areas as well as pedestrian, bicycle, or mass transit linkages.
- c. A primary building should have a clearly-defined entryway, featuring distinct design elements, such as;
  - ✓ A tower feature
  - ✓ A projection or recessed entryway
  - ✓ Variation in building material
  - ✓ Arches
  - ✓ Improved lighting
  - ✓ Canopies or overhangs



*This clearly-defined pedestrian entryway is marked by a stone arch and recessed windows/door.*



*The same building exhibits unique roof treatment, a middle/base/cap, and clock feature.*

- d. If built along an alley edge, new structures in downtown DeKalb might consider including an attractive, secondary entryway oriented toward the pedestrian alley. Display windows and other features might also be included.

## **6. Awnings, Overhangs, & Arcades**

- ✓ *Awnings*; elements added to the face of a building, usually semi-permanent. For example, a canvas with metal framework.
- ✓ *Overhangs*; permanent structures that are anchored to the building.
- ✓ *Arcades*; permanent structures supported by columns in the walkway in addition to the building face.

- a. Weather protection should not overhang from the building for more than five (5) feet, generally.
- b. Awnings should extend over individual windows and door openings, instead one large awning over an entire storefront or set of windows.
- c. It is generally discouraged that awnings be treated as signage. Avoid duplicate signage (see example below).
- d. Awning colors and materials should complement the color scheme and character of the building's façade. Solid colors or striped patterns are preferred.

## 7. Signage

Signage is an important aspect of overall building design, especially in a central business district.



*Distinct, identifiable signage.*



*Multiple signs (for multiple tenants) remain consistent in size, color, and scale.*

- a. Signage should be incorporated into a building's architecture, not as an unrelated object. With regards to signage, scale is important (refer to City of DeKalb's sign ordinance).
- b. Signage should be chiefly pedestrian-oriented (instead of vehicular).
- c. If multiple signs are used on a new structure (for multiple tenants) signage should remain consistent throughout in scale and style.
- d. High-quality materials should be used for signage.
- e. Decorative overhang/blade signs are encouraged, but typically should not extend more than two feet from a building's façade.
- f. Signage wording and graphics should be legible.
- g. Signage should not hide prominent architectural features.
- h. Wall-mounted lighting of downtown signage is encouraged, as is individually illuminated characters over internally illuminated box signs.
- i. Fluorescent lighting and moving or blinking images are discouraged.
- j. Temporary signs and flyers in storefront windows are discouraged.



*Discouraged; box signs and duplicate awning signage.*

## 8. Exterior Lighting

- a. Permanent, wall-mounted lighting fixtures might be included on all sides abutting a pedestrian walkway.
- b. Exterior lighting accents, 'spotlighting' might be included along upper floors of new structures to highlight architectural details.
- c. Primary and secondary entries should be brightly lit.



*'Spotlighting'*



*'Spotlighting'*

## PART IV. A PEDESTRIAN FOCUS

A revitalized central business district in DeKalb will “serve the community and attract visitors”. Accordingly, new construction in downtown DeKalb should be pedestrian-focused (one that attracts foot traffic, fosters a sense of safety, etc.).

### 1. Public Space

- a. New buildings in downtown DeKalb should incorporate new public spaces, and utilize existing ones.
- b. Public spaces should be designed so that they are easily accessed from the street and sidewalks.
- c. New developments located adjacent to existing public spaces (DeKalb Square, Van Buer Plaza, etc.) should frame and complement the public area.
- d. Open spaces should maximize the use of landscaped green space; including trees, shrubs, flowers, plant beds, and planters.
- e. New buildings should define public spaces with landscaping and street furnishings at the sidewalk level (pedestrian seating, porches, tables, planters, lighting, art, a courtyard feature, etc.).
- f. Outdoor seating is encouraged at downtown eateries.



*Sidewalk features (lighting, planters, bench, trash receptacle, etc.) help define public space.*

### **Sustainability Tip;**

Save energy! Public spaces should be well-lit (calm, natural light) but avoid excessive lighting, which can affect night-sky viewing and the migratory patterns of birds.



*Green space adjacent to medium-density residential development. Note brick, trees, and lighting fixtures.*

## **2. Parking**

- a. Parking areas (surface lots and/or parking structures) should be integrated into the design of the new development, with an emphasis on aesthetics. Corner parking lots are discouraged.
- b. Parking structures might incorporate first-floor retail to maintain ‘storefront’ setting in DeKalb’s central business district.
- c. If surface parking lots are included, lots should be designed to enhance the pedestrian experience, and might include detailed walks, pavement, decorative elements, and curbing.
- d. Creative materials should be considered (brick, stone, granite, etc.) on surface lots instead of merely concrete and asphalt.
- e. Landscaping should be evenly distributed throughout the parking areas.
- f. Pedestrian linkages should be incorporated into parking design, connecting surface lots and structures with pedestrian entryways and the streetscape.
- g. Parking lots should incorporate elements similar to a streetscape or public plaza – benches, lighting, monuments, art pieces, etc.

### **Sustainability Tip;**

Use pervious pavement materials, such as paver systems and pervious concrete, to minimize stormwater runoff.



*Parking structure, Univ. Alabama – Birmingham*



*Akron, Ohio parking structure.*

## **PART V. SUSTAINABLE DESIGN STANDARDS**



In the United States, buildings account for; 68% of electricity consumption, 12% of water use, and account for 60% of non-industrial waste generated (from construction/demolition). Accordingly, the City of DeKalb encourages sustainable or ‘green’ building design in the central business district – responsible design will create a healthy and thriving urban environment, while minimizing consumption. The use of innovative ‘green’ building design will result in lower operating costs for property owners, and positively impact DeKalb’s economy. Implementation of sustainable design standards should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the following outcomes<sup>1</sup>;

- ✓ Optimize Site/Existing Structure Potential
- ✓ Optimize Energy Use
- ✓ Protect & Conserve Water
- ✓ Use Environmentally Preferable Products
- ✓ Enhance Indoor Environmental Quality
- ✓ Optimize Operational & Maintenance Practices

The U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) has taken the lead in identifying sustainable design standards and procedures. New construction projects in the City of DeKalb are eligible for the USGBC’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification (LEED). For additional info on USGBC’s design resources and certification program, visit [www.usgbc.org](http://www.usgbc.org). For additional information on the Whole Building Design Guide’s ‘Six Fundamental Sustainable Building Design Principles’, please visit [www.wbdg.org](http://www.wbdg.org).

You may contact the Chicago Chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council for more information.

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<sup>1</sup> The six outcomes are from the Whole Building Design Guide’s (WBDG) ‘six fundamental’ sustainable building design principles.

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