

## The Built Environment

**GOAL:** Protect, preserve and promote a high-quality built environment.

An essential element of Providence’s quality of life is its urban design — how the city looks, feels, and functions. “Urban design” refers to the basic structural forms on which the city is built — natural features such as waterways, landforms, and topography; the street grid, alleys, the open space system; the architecture of its buildings, infrastructure, and public spaces; and the relationships among all of these elements. Providence has achieved high-quality urban design consistently over time and people cherish the result.

### History of Design Excellence

Fortunately for Providence, at several critical points in its history, leaders recognized the value of the city’s special features and character and worked to preserve and restore the elements that make Providence unique. These include the traditionally designed public buildings, road network, and open spaces that use Providence’s natural assets to the best advantage and create a unique civic identity. It also includes the land development patterns that feature compact, walkable neighborhoods and outstanding architecture.

One of the oldest cities in the northeast, Providence has retained an unusual urban coherence, which combines exemplary 18th and 19th century residential neighborhoods with many high-quality industrial buildings and a central business district downtown. Sustaining excellence in urban design into the future demands that Providence continues to use its best legacies to guide development. While new development need not conform to or attempt to replicate the precise historical or architectural particulars of historic buildings, it should reflect the fine qualities of design and use of materials inherent to Providence’s built environment. This applies to all of the city’s neighborhoods, and both new construction and rehabilitation. It also applies to infrastructure such as streets and bridges, as well as public and private buildings.

Providence’s identity is shaped largely by the diversity and evolution of its architectural styles, dating from the 1600s to the present. Fortunately, some of the architectural heritage of every era remains as part of the built environment of the city. Historic buildings provide not only a sense of place but a sense of continuity with the past. We can learn from them about the people who came before us, how they lived and worked and shaped the city we know today.

The economic value of historic preservation in Providence is well established. Historic preservation is an economic development tool that creates jobs, stimulates related retail and service industries, generates tax revenue, and develops Providence as a business location and tourist destination. 7% of Providence’s land area falls within a local historic district. Altogether, the local and national districts cover 31% of the city’s land area. From late 2013 until today, property owners have spent over \$300 million on construction in Providence’s local districts. In the same span, property owners have spent \$2.5 billion on

construction in the city as a whole. Thus, work in historic districts counted for 13% of overall spending in just 7% of the city's land area.

### **Tools to Promote High-Quality Urban Design**

**Historic Districts.** Cities like Providence recognize that historic buildings are culturally, aesthetically, and financially valuable to the community as a whole and are worthy of preservation. In 1960, the city created the Providence Historic District Commission (PHDC) to protect the unique physical character and visual identity of the city by regulating development in designated local historic districts. In Providence, historic districts are established as zoning overlay districts after extensive neighborhood consultation and education, a public hearing, and adoption by the City Council. Providence has eight local historic districts, containing a total of approximately 2,600 properties. Local historic districts contain residential, commercial, religious, educational, industrial, governmental, transportation, and civic buildings, in addition to other structures and open spaces, and represent a range of architectural styles. In 2021, the city adopted its newest historic district, the Power-Cooke Street Historic District, which contains 90 properties.

In 2000, Providence developed the Industrial and Commercial Buildings District, the state's first non-contiguous, thematic local historic district. This district is composed of mid-19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial and commercial buildings throughout the city. The buildings in this district are reviewed by the PHDC for demolition and major alterations only. The landmark status makes these buildings eligible for state, federal and local tax incentives for their rehabilitation and renovation. In 2014, Providence created the Providence Landmarks District (PLD). Following the non-contiguous model, the PLD incorporated the ICBD as a sub-category, and added a new residential sub-category. The residential category is composed primarily of individually listed National Register properties (approximately 33 buildings). The residential district also includes approximately 22 significant buildings that owners requested for inclusion in the district. By adopting the PLD, Providence has protected the majority of individually listed National Register properties in the city.

Providence also contains many National Register Districts. Properties in these districts, when not also in local historic districts, are generally not regulated by the city, but are eligible to receive state and federal historic tax credits.

**Downtown Zoning.** In 1994, the city created the DOWNCITY Overlay District to regulate the design of buildings and open spaces in the historic core of Downtown Providence. The DOWNCITY Design Review Committee was designated as a public body to review design within the district. In 2012, as the state was in the process of demolishing I-195, which passed through the middle of Downtown, the city refashioned its Downtown zoning to extend design review into the Jewelry District and the I-195 redevelopment corridor in Downtown and Fox Point. The DOWNCITY Design Review Committee (DDRC) was renamed the Downtown Design Review Committee and given broader authority to regulate design in this area.

In 2011, the I-195 Redevelopment District Commission was created by the R.I. General Assembly to serve as the property owner and development review board for the I-195 surplus parcels. The city collaborates closely with the I-195 Commission to ensure that development on its land is designed appropriately and fits within the urban design context of the city.

The Capital Center Special Development District, created in 1982, is an overlay zoning district located in the northern portion of Downtown. The Capital Center Commission (CCC) was established to administer development in the district. By ordinance, when the CCC dissolves, the DDRC and its staff will assume jurisdiction over the area of applicability. In order to have a more consistent regulatory structure in Downtown, the city supports the dissolution of the CCC. This will require action and coordination by city, state, and federal agencies, with legislation introduced at the city and state level to ensure a smooth transition to the new regulatory structure.

**Development Plan Review.** The city utilizes a process called Development Plan Review (DPR) to review many types of projects, including those under the purview of the City Plan Commission, the DDRC, and city staff. The city has recently incorporated new tools to integrate design review into the DPR process.

**Tax Incentives.** In 2002, the State of Rhode Island created economic incentives to stimulate the redevelopment and reuse of historic properties. The owners of these properties were eligible for state tax credits equal to 30 percent of qualified rehabilitation expenditures, which was the most generous state historic tax credit program in the country. In combination with the federal historic tax credit of 20 percent, redevelopers of historic buildings in Rhode Island were able to get back 50 percent of their qualified expenses. Unfortunately, the state historic tax credit was eliminated in 2008. In 2013 a R.I. state historic tax credit was reinstated where projects can earn 20-25% of qualified rehabilitation expenditures. The current program is set to sunset on June 30, 2024.

In 2015 the state created the Rebuild Rhode Island tax credit program, which allows for adaptive reuse or development of recognized historic structures. The program is set to sunset on December 31, 2024. The city feels strongly that the state historic tax credit and the Rebuild Rhode Island tax credit programs must be further extended to help preserve our significant historic structures and to help foster development.

## Challenges

**Financial Burden.** Local historic districts protect some of Providence's most important legacies, but can also put a financial burden on homeowners who must adhere to strict standards for renovation and preservation. In some instances, regulations to sustain the historic features of buildings are beyond the economic means of homeowners. Government incentives are often critical to assist historic property owners in preserving their properties.

**Natural Hazards and Sea Level Rise.** A significant portion of the city's infrastructure and facilities are at risk of impact by natural hazards. Extreme flooding has occurred in the past, most notably in 2010, and

reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that this will only increase with severe storm events. Given its location at the head of Narragansett Bay and its low elevation, the city is vulnerable to flood damage, and many historic buildings at risk.

**Development of Vacant Lots.** In the late 1980s and early 1990s many of Providence's neighborhoods were littered with vacant lots. With an increase in market pressure, many of those lots have been developed. While this has been a welcome change and has produced needed housing, the quality of construction on many of these infill lots has been poor. Residential and commercial infill projects have been constructed with poor quality materials, and do not fit in with the character of the existing homes and businesses. More effort should be made to encourage and mandate quality design for infill construction.

### Ongoing Policy Challenges

**Sustainable Development.** In recent years there has been a recognition that our buildings need to be more sustainable in terms of use of building materials, energy efficiency, use of renewable energy, water conservation, stormwater management, to name a few. LEED and other standards of environmentally sustainable construction are now widely accepted and increasingly attainable. The city has taken a lead role in this movement, through developing and renovating schools and other buildings to green standards. The city should adopt policies that result in continued improvements in sustainable building practices, including adaptive reuse and stormwater management.

**Alternative Energies in/on Historic Structures.** Home and business owners often want to install alternative energy technologies on their home or business. In 2013 the Historic District Commission created standards for the installation of solar energy systems. Since this time the HDC has reviewed 80 solar applications, with an approval rating of 97%, striking a balance between the need to protect the built environment and changing technologies.

**Neighborhood Character.** The increasing need for a broad array of housing options requires a more diverse mix of residential types that are both affordable and complementary to neighborhood character. New construction must be sensitive to the character and qualities of Providence's neighborhoods. It is also important to retain the traditional character of neighborhood commercial districts, while allowing for more density in appropriate areas.

**Undesignated Structures.** Many buildings in Providence that may qualify for landmark designation are outside of historic districts. The City continues to evaluate properties for landmark designation. This plan identifies properties that should be included in historic districts.

**Modern Architecture.** The city has not adequately addressed preservation standards for significant examples of architecture from the second half of the 20th century. Without foresight, more architecturally significant structures of this underappreciated era may be lost. Neighborhoods and architectural styles developed after World War II have matured but are not addressed by current

preservation policies. Many of these areas are intact in form, but have had their materials changed. Their pattern of development is more significant than the intactness of their materials and should be evaluated for potential designation.

**Surface Parking Lots.** Surface parking lots downtown and along commercial corridors are an excellent opportunity for redevelopment. Filling in gaps in the urban fabric with high quality infill projects will add to the city's character.

**Underrepresented Communities.** The city has been evaluating recognition of significant properties and sites in areas not typically covered by historic districts. In some cases, physical buildings no longer exist, and we are evaluating how to recognize them in ways that have meaning to the community.

## Objectives and Strategies

### OBJECTIVE BE1: DESIGN EXCELLENCE

Promote a culture of high-quality architecture and urban design.

#### Strategies:

- A. Promote high-quality urban design through design standards and design review.
- B. Reevaluate and improve design standards for all development projects.
- C. Strategically invest in public infrastructure, streetscapes, and public amenities to promote Providence's civic identity and attract high-quality development.
- D. Consolidate the development review process in Downtown by dissolving the Capital Center Commission and subjecting all projects to a uniform development plan review process.

### OBJECTIVE BE2: NEW DEVELOPMENT AND TRADITIONAL CHARACTER

Encourage new development to be compatible with Providence's traditional character.

#### Strategies:

- A. Through the design review process, promote design innovation and architectural diversity that complements Providence's traditional character.
- B. Encourage developments to be compatible with surrounding uses while not stifling innovative design and architecture.
- B. Ensure that regulations reinforce high-quality urban design and traditional neighborhood character through rules governing size, scale and massing.
- C. Promote and incentivize the redevelopment and reduction of surface parking lots and excessive impervious surface.
- D. Encourage mixed-use, pedestrian oriented developments along commercial corridors and in other growth areas at a greater height and density than in the residential areas.
- E. Ensure that new developments improve pedestrian movement and provide pedestrian amenities.

**OBJECTIVE BE3: DESIGN OF THE PUBLIC REALM**

Reinforce the design quality, function, and character of connections among public places and centers of activity.

Strategies:

- A. Preserve, enhance, extend, and connect the historic patterns and character of the city's street and sidewalk system.
- B. Develop streetscape standards that enhance the pedestrian experience and incorporate high-quality design elements that are economical and easy to maintain.
- C. Promote public art in the built environment that reinforces a sense of place.

**OBJECTIVE BE4: PRESERVATION PLANNING**

Preserve the historic buildings and districts that contribute positively to Providence's urban fabric.

Strategies:

- A. Protect and preserve historic resources citywide through design standards, zoning controls, easements, and other tools.
- B. Consider adopting varying degrees of regulation for historic properties. Explore whether a lesser regulated local historic district is viable for certain areas.
- C. Identify stronger enforcement options to discourage the alteration and demolition of historic resources without approval.
- D. Develop additional financial incentives and tools, such as property tax incentives, for property owners to rehabilitate structures of architectural or historic merit.
- E. Require institutions to identify historic buildings and plan for their future use. Evaluate institutional properties listed or eligible for the State or National Historic Register for inclusion into local historic districts.
- F. Update the zoning map to reflect appropriate boundaries of historic districts, including adding new properties and removing properties where demolition has occurred.

**OBJECTIVE BE5: DESIGN LEADERSHIP**

Ensure that the City of Providence takes the lead in design excellence and historic preservation.

Strategies:

- A. Support and encourage historic preservation of city-owned properties. Historic city properties such as former schools and firehouses should be considered for adaptive reuse and demolished only as a last resort.
- B. Consider the adaptive reuse of historic buildings when procuring office space for city agencies.
- C. Work with the state to evaluate and address the impact of building codes and other regulations on historic preservation.
- D. Design and construct city buildings as models of design excellence.

- E. Construct and rehabilitate municipal buildings to high standards of energy efficiency and sustainability.
- F. Continue to develop standard house designs that developers can easily adapt to vacant lots in the city.

#### **OBJECTIVE BE6: PUBLIC AWARENESS**

Promote public awareness of urban design and historic preservation principles through education and collaboration with partners and schools.

##### Strategies:

- A. Raise public awareness of the historic significance of structures and areas in Providence.
- B. Encourage partnerships with design and preservation organizations to organize public information campaigns, particularly in underrepresented communities.
- C. Support efforts to educate Providence residents on the importance of high-quality urban design and historic preservation.
- D. Support student education and involvement in urban design and historic preservation.

#### **OBJECTIVE BE7: THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND THE REGION**

Work with the State of Rhode Island and adjacent communities to support design excellence and historic preservation in the region.

##### Strategies:

- A. Encourage the state to restore the historic tax credit.
- B. Work with adjacent communities to ensure high-quality design on the city's borders.
- C. Encourage high-quality urban design for state projects within the city.

#### **OBJECTIVE BE8: THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL HAZARDS**

Protect the built realm from natural hazards.

##### Strategies:

- A. Continue to identify areas at risk of natural hazards within the city's built environment.
- B. Refine regulations regarding building in high-hazard areas.
- C. Work to reduce vulnerability to natural hazards by improving stormwater management structures and practices.
- D. If necessary, remove vulnerable structures in high hazard areas.
- E. Evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the Fox Point Hurricane Barrier in protecting the built environment.