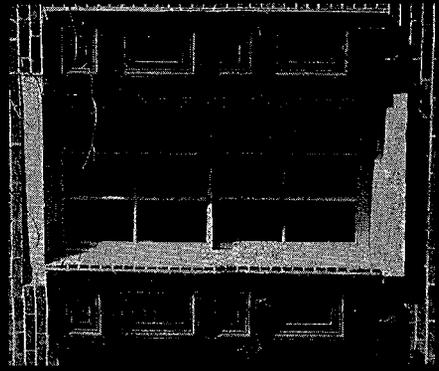
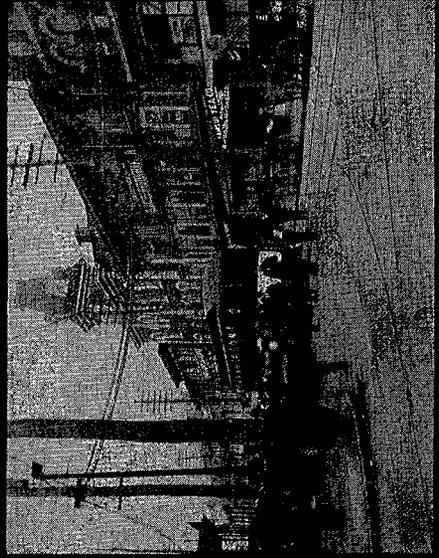
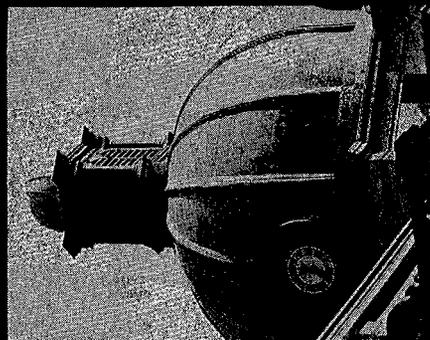
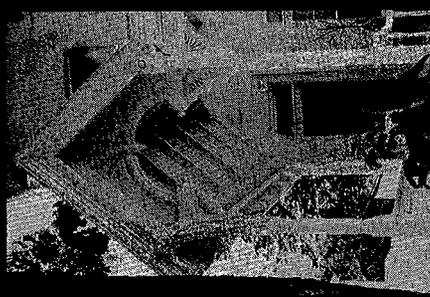
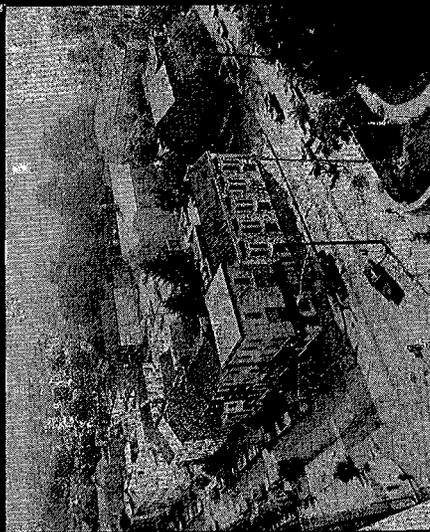
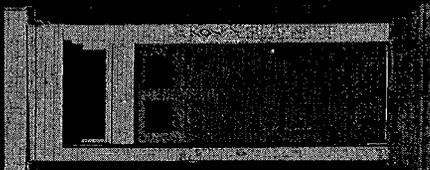


NORRISTOWN DESIGN GUIDE





FOREWORD

The Norristown Preservation Society believes that the buildings of Norristown are one of its vital resources. They serve as reminders of its past and opportunities for its future.

This booklet is a practical guide to improving the appearance of Norristown's architectural resources. It is designed to give the reader an understanding of the richness of our architectural heritage and to outline practical ways to improve the appearance of properties throughout the Borough.

With this booklet, the Norristown property owner will learn about his building and be able to improve his property in a way that will benefit the entire community.

BOROUGH OF NORRISTOWN PENNSYLVANIA



ROBERT B. YARNELL

The **Norristown Design Guide** is dedicated to the memory of Robert B. Yarnell whose insight, interest, and initiative have challenged and inspired us to pursue his dream of a renaissance in Norristown. Those who knew and admired him are pleased that the fund established in his name will be used to carry forth his vision.

NORRISTOWN: A Brief History

1785 In 1785 the Pennsylvania Legislature created Montgomery County and selected a site for the new county seat on the Norris Plantation. This site was chosen because it was a convenient place to cross the Schuylkill River and was already a well-travelled crossroads. A courthouse, a prison and other public buildings were built on a hilltop overlooking the river. Smaller, modest houses sprang up around the public buildings. This early group of buildings formed the beginnings of what we know today as Norristown.

FACTORY TOWN During the early 19th century, strong ties developed between Norristown and Philadelphia. The Schuylkill Canal (1826), a bridge across the Schuylkill River (1830) and a rail line to Philadelphia and upstate markets forged links between Norristown, Philadelphia and other communities. As these transportation routes developed, large industrial mills were constructed in Norristown, and the community became a factory town as well as a government seat. Many of the buildings in Norristown date from this time of rapid industrial growth.

RESIDENTIAL CENTER In 1912, when the Philadelphia and Western Railway Company completed its high-speed trolley line from downtown Norristown to the 69th Street terminal, Norristown became a residential suburb of Philadelphia. People could then live in the Borough and commute quickly to jobs in the city.

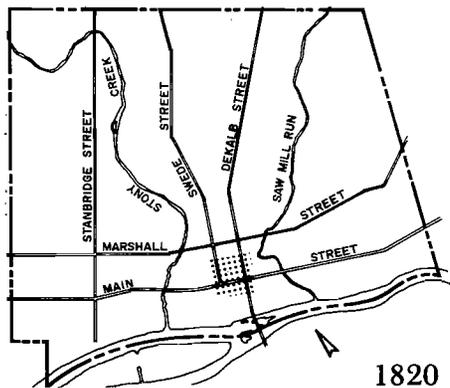
THRIVING ECONOMY As a center for government, industry and residences, Norristown prospered. It thrived economically and culturally until after World War II.

PRESENT-DAY NORRISTOWN With the exception of a few newer neighborhoods, the boundaries of present-day Norristown were drawn in 1852. Most of the land was developed between 1820 and 1930. This development has left us with a large and diverse stock of 19th century buildings.

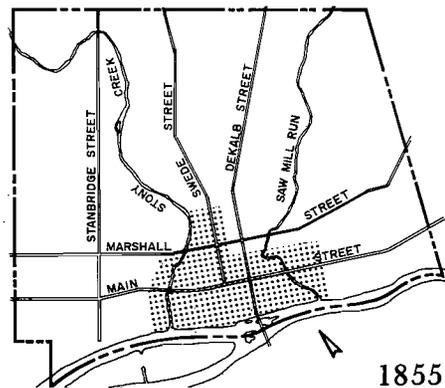
NORRISTOWN: The Architectural Heritage

A MIX OF STYLES The many building types constructed between 1820 and 1930 still exist side by side in Norristown: large and impressive public buildings next to simple row houses; large brick buildings with distinctive mansard roofs alongside houses with gingerbread trim; simple storefronts next to elegant mansions. This mixture reflects a long history of economic success and offers a resource for future development.

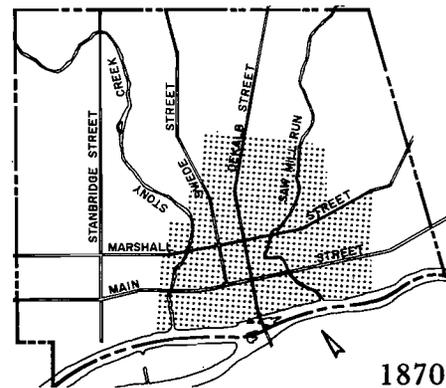
GUIDES FOR THE FUTURE This guide-book begins by describing and illustrating the main architectural styles in Norristown. There are many variations on each style throughout the community. The features of each style, however, are often easy to identify and can be clues to the date and history of many buildings. These features can be used as the basis for renovation designs that will emphasize the special appeal of many older buildings.



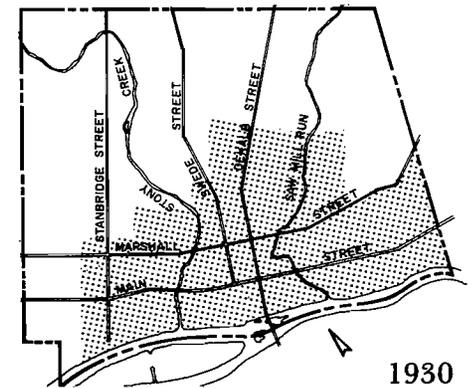
1820



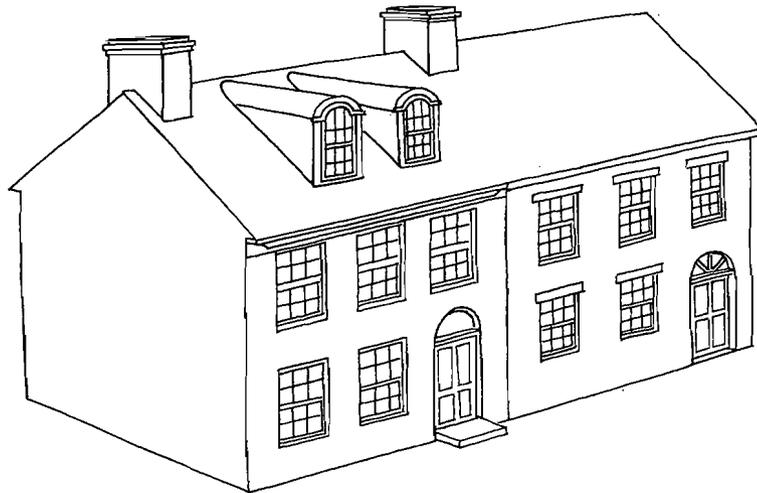
1855



1870



1930



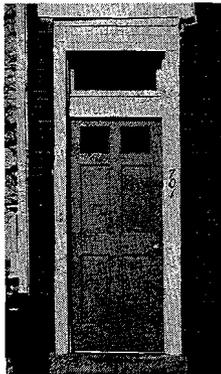
1785-1820: Only a few Federal style buildings remain in Norristown today, and **FEDERAL STYLE** even fewer still have their original detailing intact. Most structures built during this period were modest box like buildings of stone, wood or brick. Some were stuccoed, masking an otherwise rough masonry wall. Decorative details were usually limited to the entrance, which often had fan-shaped panes of glass over the door.

TYPICAL FEATURES:

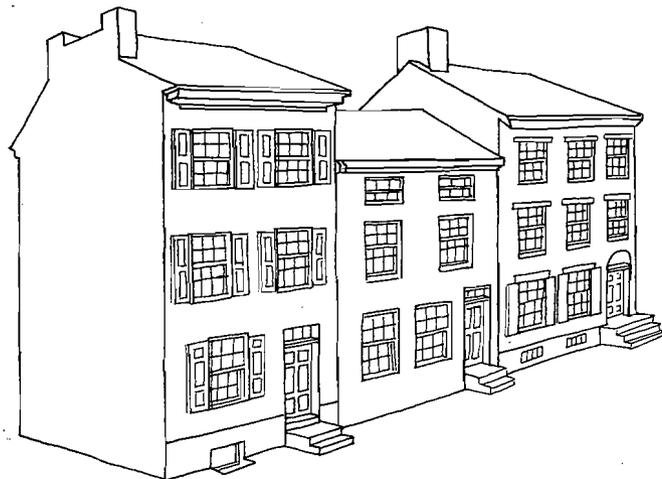
- Glazed transom or semicircular window fanlight over main door
- Steep gable roof with arched dormers
- Large, square chimneys
- Six panes of glass in both the upper and lower window sashes



Federal Style



Greek Revival



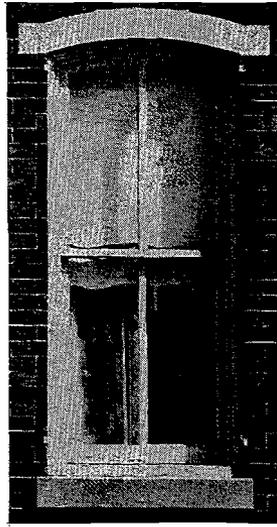
1815-1855: Most privately owned buildings built in Norristown during the first half of the 19th century are simple structures with **GREEK REVIVAL** out much decoration. Greek Revival is the most recognizable style from this period. As in the Federal style, these are box like rectangular buildings. Unlike the Federal buildings, however, the roofs are typically low pitched. The triangular gable end faces the street. Chimneys at the gable end, though smaller in this period, remain a significant architectural feature. Windows are not decorated with fancy detail and are capped with a flat wooden top. The cornices, directly under the roof line, are either unadorned or have simple geometric detailing. Many rowhouses in and around Norristown's downtown are Greek Revival. A few more elaborate Greek Revival buildings also remain; they have Greek columns and decoration around the entrances.

TYPICAL FEATURES:

- Rectangular windows over entrance
- Simple flat window trim
- Low pitched gable roof
- Double chimneys at gable end
- Windows with either six or nine panes of glass in both the top and bottom sash
- Grecian detailing at doorway



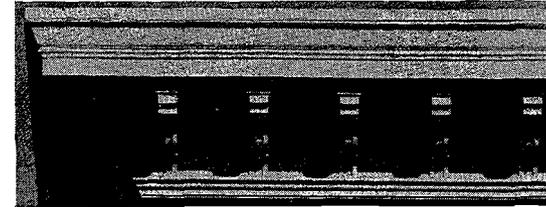
Gothic Revival



Italianate

1850-1870: During Victorian era many decorative European building styles were brought to America. Both public and private buildings were rebuilt in a fancy, elaborate style. In the 1850's and 1860's many of the downtown church congregations in Norristown built larger, more imposing churches. The courthouse was rebuilt on the original site, and a larger, castle-like prison was built nearby. These imposing European-style public buildings remain as a focal point of the Borough. Houses and stores from this period, in contrast with the simplicity of the earlier periods, have more complex forms and elaborate decoration.

During this period, commerce grew and the first-floor space in many houses was converted to shop space. New storefronts with large windows replaced the original brick on the first floor. This trend often produced a mixture of styles within a single building. Many rowhouses in the West End have Italianate features (see below). Many other Victorian buildings still exist in neighborhoods just north of downtown and are scattered through the East and West Ends.



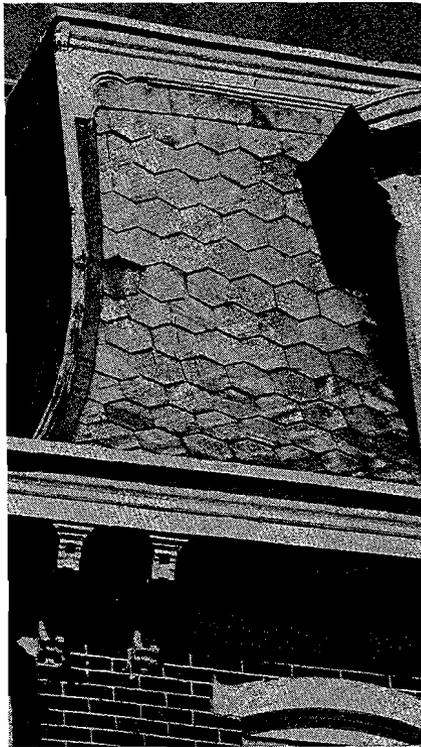
TYPICAL FEATURES: VICTORIAN ERA

Italianate

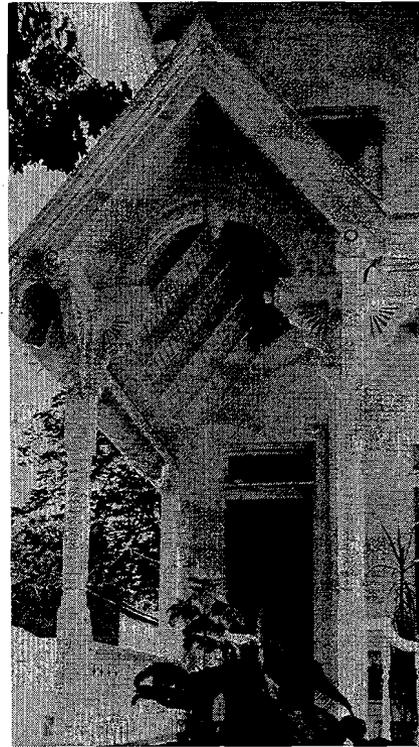
- Fancy bracketed cornices
- Wide, overhanging eaves
- Shallow, pitched roof
- Long, narrow windows with round tops
- Two panes of glass in both top and bottom of windows
- Decorative panels accenting the roof lines

Gothic Revival

- Complex intersecting roof lines with steep, pointed gables
- Gingerbread trim accenting gable roofs
- Bracketed cornices
- Pointed arch windows at attic level
- Two panes of glass in both top and bottom of windows



Second Empire



Queen Anne



1865-1910: The buildings in Norristown constructed during the late Victorian Era are even more decorative and elaborate than the earlier Italianate and Gothic Revival buildings. Two of the most common late Victorian styles are French Second Empire and English Queen Anne.

LATE VICTORIAN ERA

The distinctive mansard roofs of the French Second Empire style can still be seen on older commercial buildings throughout the downtown and on rowhouses in the West End.

The irregular shapes and elaborate trim of the Queen Anne style are also still common in Norristown architecture. Many of the mansions along DeKalb and West Main Streets have the projecting bay windows and decorative brickwork characteristic of this style. Many other building styles during this period are still represented in Norristown. Stick style, Romanesque Revival and Eastlake are less common here, but the scattered representatives of these styles add to the architectural mixture.

TYPICAL FEATURES:

French Second Empire

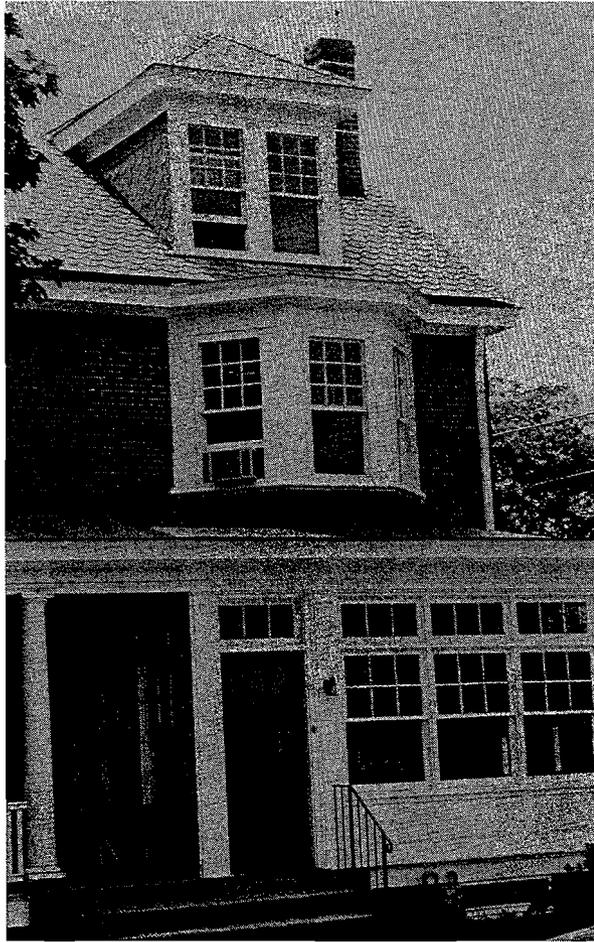
- Mansard roof
- Bracketed cornice under mansard roof
- Dormer windows
- Tall, narrow windows

Queen Anne

- Irregular building shapes with projecting bay windows and porches
- Extensive gingerbread trim
- Tall, narrow windows of varying shapes
- Tall, slender chimneys with decorative brickwork

Additional Styles:

- Romanesque Revival:** Mixed brick and sandstone construction; heavy forms with arched windows and doors.
- Eastlake:** Delicate, turned wooden trim on porches
- Stick Style:** Wood siding decorated with vertical, horizontal and diagonal boards suggesting the structural frame



Colonial Revival



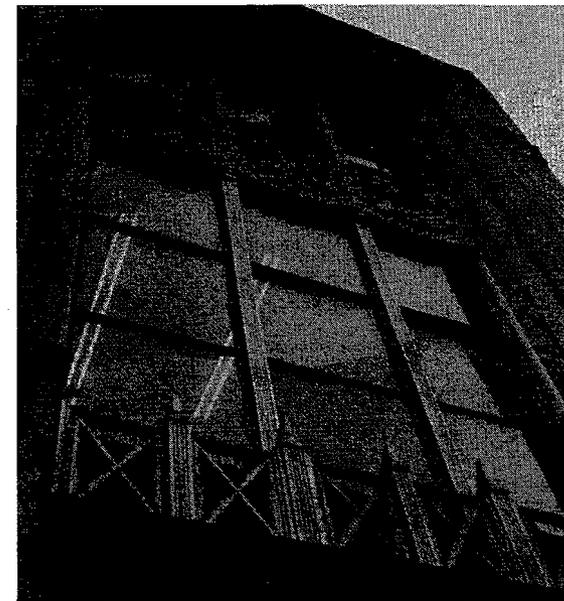
1910-1955: The reuse of Georgian and Colonial design toward the end of the 19th and into the 20th century is typically found in bank buildings, churches and suburban homes. Colonial revival houses are sometimes not easy to tell from Colonial buildings. Houses constructed during this period were predominately simple semi-detached or detached dwellings with decorative front porches.

ART DECO

Technological advances in the 20th century marked a turning point in architecture. Though some prominent buildings still reflected styles of the past, new materials and smoother, glossy surfaces were coming into their own in public and commercial structures.

Art Deco stands out clearly from the older European styles. This new look is created by sleek tiles, curved glass and aluminum, streamlined shapes and geometric patterns as seen in the old Philadelphia and Western terminal building and the A.D. Eisenhower Middle School.

Typical features are smooth curved surfaces, angular patterns incised in tile and extensive use of glass, tile and metal.



Art Deco

NORRISTOWN: Now

UNCOVERING THE PAST During the 1950's and 1960's much of the architectural richness of the Borough has been covered by contemporary sidings, ornament and signs. A great deal of early trim and decoration still exists beneath this applied sheathing. Using available information and good preservation techniques, owners of earlier buildings can recapture and adapt their buildings to fit today's needs. Documentation of the original appearance of the buildings is often available in books or old photographs of Norristown.

DETECTIVE WORK If you are a property owner thinking about rehabilitating your property, first acquaint yourself with your building and its background. Research the history of the building and obtain early photographs of the facade. You can often find the best information about the building's original style on the building itself. Early elements, particularly on the upper stories, often remain intact and provide clues to the original appearance of the first floor and storefront. Knowing how these features looked, the basic character of the entire building will be evident. Consult with an architect or designer for professional advice on proper design approaches. Before performing any work, establish a program for overall preservation of the structure. This program should outline maintenance budgets and construction phases. Check with the Borough Planning office as to the possibility of a grant or funding to help in facade improvement.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

1. Retain the original scale and proportions of the building. The scale of a building, together with the original detail of the facade, is a valuable feature that should be preserved and maintained.
2. Any design for a building facade should make use of the entire building, from bottom to top. The storefront at the first floor level of commercial buildings should be designed as part of the larger wall from the ground to the roof.
3. Wherever possible, preserve building elements that are either original or that date from the time of early alterations. Repairing, repainting and maintaining original features of a building is generally a far easier and more economical task than trying to duplicate these items.

4. Duplicate and replace deteriorated building parts if they must be removed. If this is economically infeasible, you can use other materials as substitutes for the original. For example, elaborate Victorian cornices can be economically reproduced in fiberglass, and much millwork can be duplicated with built-up contemporary, stock moldings.
5. If a building is of historical interest and has deteriorated trim that cannot be repaired, make a record of the original piece. Make a photograph, measured drawing or outline of the original trim before it is removed from the building. Bring the information to the Montgomery County Historical Society for future reference.
6. The color scheme of the renovation should reflect the historical period of the building.

IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS

STRUCTURE AND MAINTENANCE Repair and maintenance work are essential to preserve an older building and should be the first item of work in any renovation. Specifically, you should inspect the building with a contractor or engineer to identify structural problems such as cracked, dusting or flaking masonry; settlement or leaning in bearing walls; decayed or cracked joists, rafters, window heads or sills; and signs of stress from excessive loads. Check trim, cornices, windows and doors for decay, water penetration, paint coverage and weather tightness. Examine roofs, cellars and foundations along with mortar joints in the masonry for water penetration and structural soundness. Evaluate and repair or upgrade mechanical and electrical systems at this stage before any exterior design work is begun. If problems are found in any of these areas, they should be corrected as a first step toward preservation of the building.

COMMERCIAL ARCHITECTURE

FACADE IMPROVEMENTS Most commercial buildings in Norristown can be dramatically upgraded by cleaning the facades, replacing missing shutters and awnings, painting the wall and trim and removing signs and ornamentation that cover the original details. Some buildings, however, have been sheathed or covered with new materials, such as metal siding, asphalt, or asbestos shingle, cement stucco or a variety of liquid sealants. Besides covering the original building, many of these materials can actually speed up the deterioration of the underlying original walls. It is generally advisable to uncover, retain and repair the original wall materials.

ARCHITECTURAL HOUSEKEEPING It is usually simple and inexpensive to remove applied sheathing. Cleaning and repairing the exposed brick requires more care. Sandblasting is not recommended. This process, regardless of the care or technique employed, permanently destroys the hardbaked face of the brick, exposing the softer body of the masonry to water and weathering. No sealant can adequately repair this damage and may introduce additional long-range problems. Steam cleaning, paint removers, mild cleaners applied with soft bristle brushes and a variety of other gentler techniques will resolve most problems far better than sandblasting.

When masonry is repaired make a concerted effort to match the brick and stonework in size, color, texture and tooling of the mortar joints. Take special care to establish a proper mortar mixture. Portland cement mixer is not only incompatible with the historical appearance of most buildings, but is hard, brittle and inflexible. The use of Portland cement mortar can damage the adjacent, early brickwork during freeze-thaw cycles. Use a flexible lime-sand mortar on historic structures.

PAINTING Painting is an important part of a regular maintenance schedule. To ensure a long-lasting paint job, scrape and prime the surface, use a good quality paint, preferably oil-based or alkyd for exterior work. Particular care is important when selecting paint colors. A color scheme that reflects the historical period of the building can greatly improve the appearance of either a commercial or a residential district.

COLOR SELECTION Determining the original exterior paint colors of a building is often easy. Sometimes it can be done by scraping a small area of trim, one layer of paint at a time. In other cases, microscopic examination of paint chips may be necessary. If possible, choose the original paint colors; if those colors are not pleasing, however, select a color scheme that blends with the character of the block as well as the architectural style of the building. Consult with a designer knowledgeable about older buildings to help make your color selection.

Color schemes for 19th and early 20th century architecture are varied. While no single rule of thumb applies to all building styles, you can use several guidelines when selecting paint colors for these periods. Avoid strong colors such as bright red, blue, yellow, purple, bright orange, or grass green. Buildings of the Victorian era were generally of dark muted colors, muddied in appearance. Earth colors were popular, along with cream and dark muted greens. A commercial row structure often had a single color applied to all trim elements, which contrasted with the wall color (for example, light trim on a dark building, or dark trim on light clapboard walls). On a commercial building with elaborate trim, consider using two colors on the trim to emphasize the decoration. Residential buildings often combined several colors in the exterior scheme, and, again, trim elements often contrasted with the wall colors to emphasize the ornamentation. Generally, the wall was painted a single color, trim (such as windows, doors, railings, porches and cornices) painted a secondary color, and shutters painted in yet a third, contrasting color. A notable exception to these color variations is Greek Revival structures, which almost always had white trim.

STOREFRONTS



BEFORE

Though a storefront is limited to the first story of a building, the condition of the entire facade contributes to the image of the storefront. Similarly, the storefront is part of the whole facade and should not detract from the proportions and window pattern of the building.

In planning a storefront renovation, the first step is research. Look for clues for the proper design approach by examining features that still exist on the upper stories and early photographs of the building. Also look carefully at the adjacent buildings which may be similar in style. An architect experienced in working with older properties is essential for a high-quality design.

ORIGINAL DESIGN The new design should reflect the style of the original building. A recent trend to “Colonialize” storefronts has left its unfortunate mark across the country. The small-paned “colonial” windows or bays capped by a pent-eave or projecting roof are not in keeping with the original design of the 19th century storefronts. When the appropriate period design is impractical, use a contemporary design that recalls the proportions of the old structure rather than modern-day “colonial” design.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY STOREFRONTS Nineteenth-century storefronts are predominantly glass display windows with recessed entrances and with wood or metal panels below the windows and above the door. Trim or moldings above the storefronts are often copies of the cornices at the roof line and unify the building design. Traditionally the windows created a large display area while allowing a maximum amount of light into the store. Windows were rarely divided into the small panes that characterize so many poor “restoration” jobs.

COMPATIBLE MATERIALS

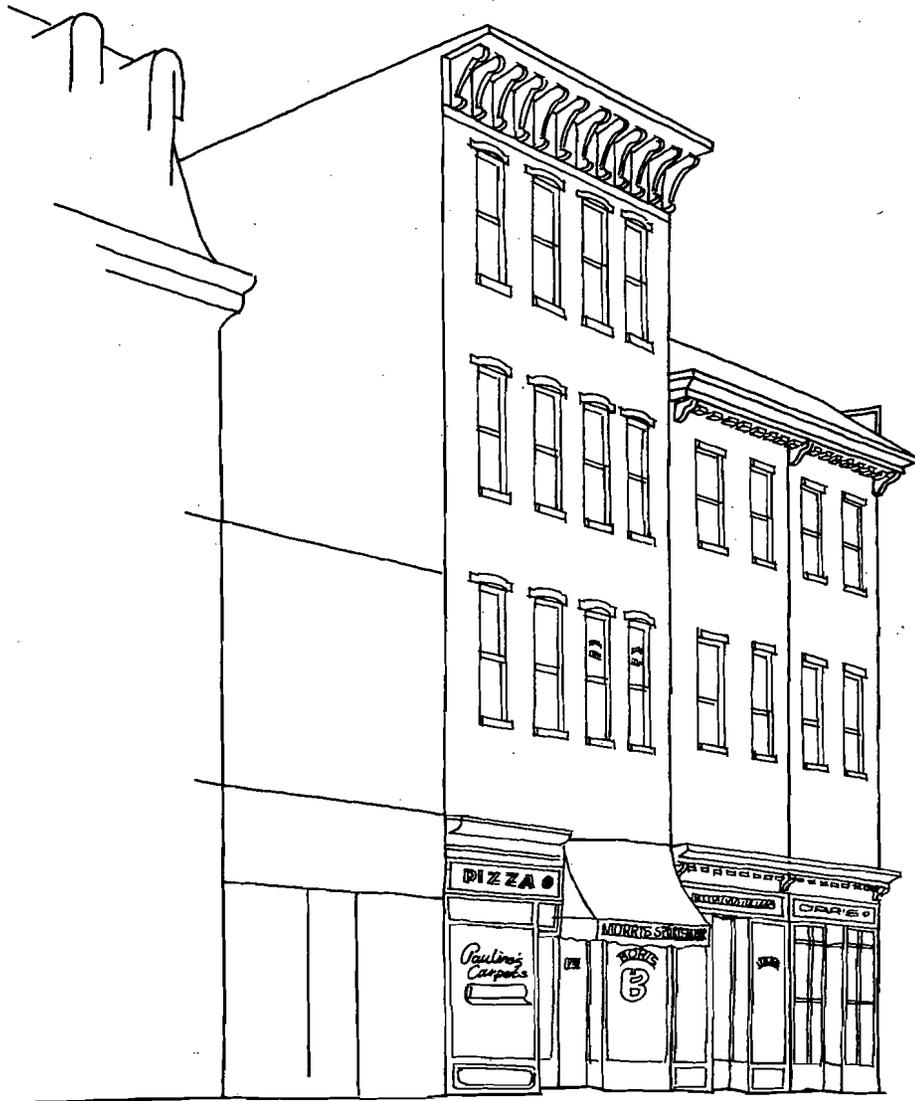
The materials used in storefront renovations should be compatible with those of the original building. In the 19th century, cornices, moldings, trim and windows were usually of wood or metal. Occasionally the areas beneath the display windows were of stone or brick. Avoid synthetic or metal siding, plastics, asbestos or asphalt. They are not in keeping with the 19th century buildings.

STOREFRONT LIGHTING

Storefront lighting is often harsh and creates an unpleasant glare. Provide a soft and well-dispersed illumination without unnecessary, exposed spot lights, back lighting or neon. The light fixtures themselves are part of the design. Select fixtures that fit into the overall storefront design. Some contemporary light fixtures are acceptable, but large, backlit plastic signs, neon and reproduction "colonial" fixtures are out of character and undesirable.

NEW CONSTRUCTION

When constructing new buildings, encourage the architect to use a contemporary design that reflects the height and proportions of neighboring buildings. In this way the appearance of the street will be unified. Likewise, new facades should be built on the existing building line. New buildings set back farther from the street make the street less inviting to pedestrian shoppers. When considering the actual design, it is first important to realize that older buildings had three distinct parts: a base (the storefront), a wall (the second and third floor facade), and a top (the cornice). Incorporate similar proportions into the new work. The floor heights and the rhythm created by the windows in the adjacent buildings should guide the design of the new building. Make sure that window and door openings are in proportion with those of the buildings on both sides and that the new facade is of a material compatible in color and character with that used elsewhere along the street.



AFTER

SIGNS



BEFORE

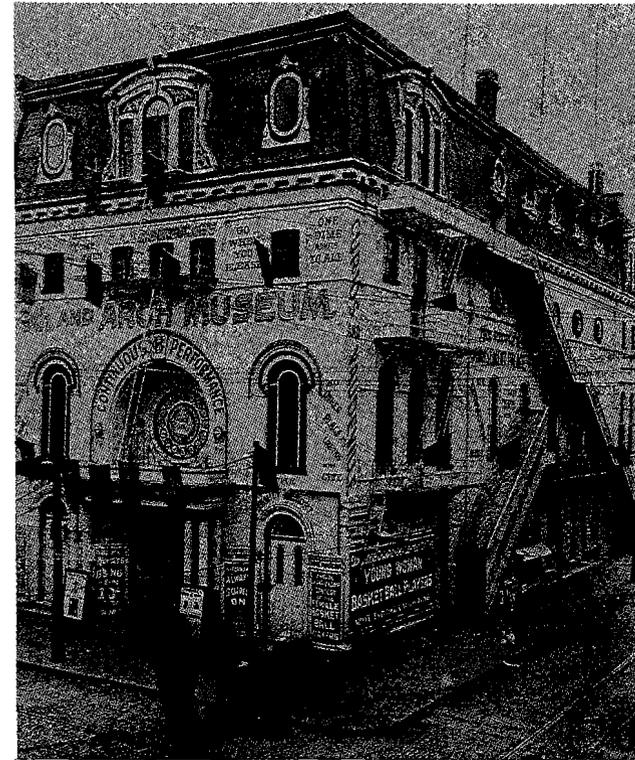
Signs that are excessive in number, chaotic in sizing or location, oversized, poorly designed or constructed of inappropriate materials, have the reverse effect that the owner of the business seeks to convey. The “clutter” that is created by such signs, detracts from the very thing that the merchant is trying to create – that the premises in question is a good place to buy merchandise or purchase services. Removing an oversized or inappropriate sign is the most significant step that you can take to improve the commercial area.

SIGN GUIDELINES

1. Locate signs so that they do not cover building features such as cornices, trim or windows.
2. Strictly limit the number and size of signs on storefront windows and doors. Lettering applied to the glass should be simple and easy to read.
3. Orient signs to pedestrians, not vehicles. Signs should be small and carefully detailed so they will appeal to someone proceeding slowly at close range.
4. Do not use two signs where one will do. One sign per business, located at the store itself, should be adequate. Too many signs are confusing and distracting. A single, well-designed sign identifies a store more effectively and inexpensively.
5. Use materials that reflect the period of the building and design of the storefront, such as cast iron, wood, tin, brass or glass. Avoid stock plastic signs; they are both expensive and unattractive.
6. Use proper lighting. Frequently, lighting is not needed for commercial signs. When used, however, it should shine only on the sign itself and not on the surrounding area. The light fixtures, if visible, should be compatible with the period of the building. Avoid neon and spot lights.



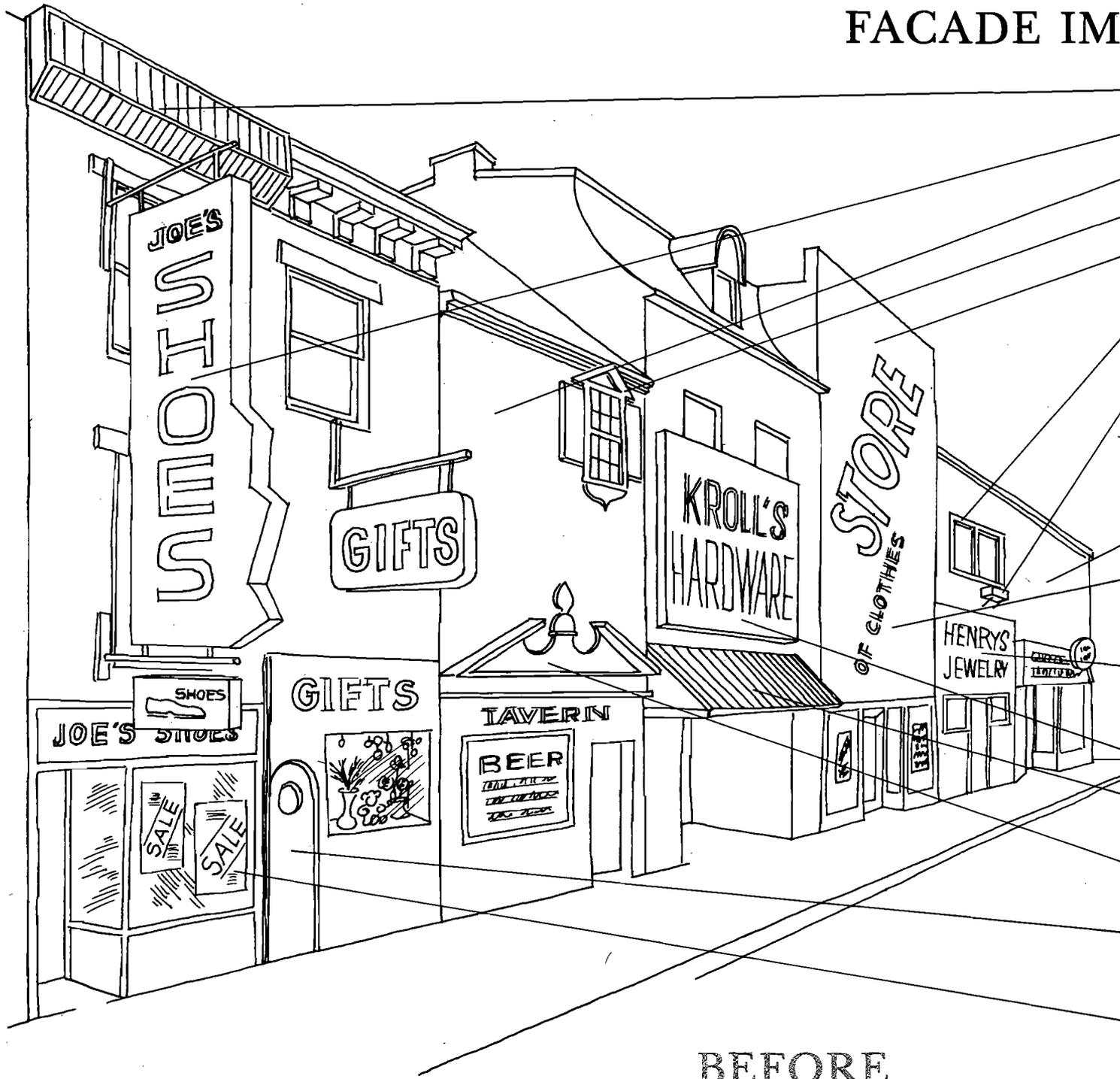
AFTER



BEFORE

7. Incorporate the signs into the design of the facade. Cornices, transoms, upper story windows, awning edges and panels are often ideal backgrounds for hand-painted lettering. The frame or trim of applied signs can be similar to moldings used elsewhere on the facade. Colors should complement the paint scheme of the storefront.
8. Keep letters to a minimum, the message brief, and to the point. In many cases, logos or illustrations that readily communicate the nature of the business can be used as signs.
9. A window display is an important type of sign. Make sure they are consistently attractive and show your merchandise off to good advantage.

FACADE IMPROVEMENTS



- Cornice covered or replaced
- Sign breaks unity of facade
- Window filled in
- Inappropriate ornamentation
- Sign scaled to motorist, rather than pedestrian
- New window of inappropriate proportions
- Inappropriate location of air conditioner.

- Facade painted a single color
- Covering of facade out of scale with building design and neighboring buildings

- First floor remodeling extends above typical storefront cornice line.

- Sign covering facade details
- Pent roof inappropriate to the design of the building

- “Colonialized” ornamentation covers original details of facade

- Door and window proportions, shapes and materials break the unity of the streetscape

- Cluttered advertising conceals interior displays and merchandise

BEFORE



- Original cornice rebuilt.
- Inappropriate signs removed.
- Window of original design re-installed
- Ornamentation removed.
- Sign removed and replaced with sign of proper location and scale.
- Windows of correct proportions, shapes and spacing re-installed.
- Trim painted in contrasting color.
- Storefront lowered and re-designed.
- Small signs located in pedestrian view.
- Sign removed.
- Appropriate cornice re-installed.
- Cornice and awning in proper proportions.
- Small sign well placed at storefront corners.

AFTER

RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

AFTER



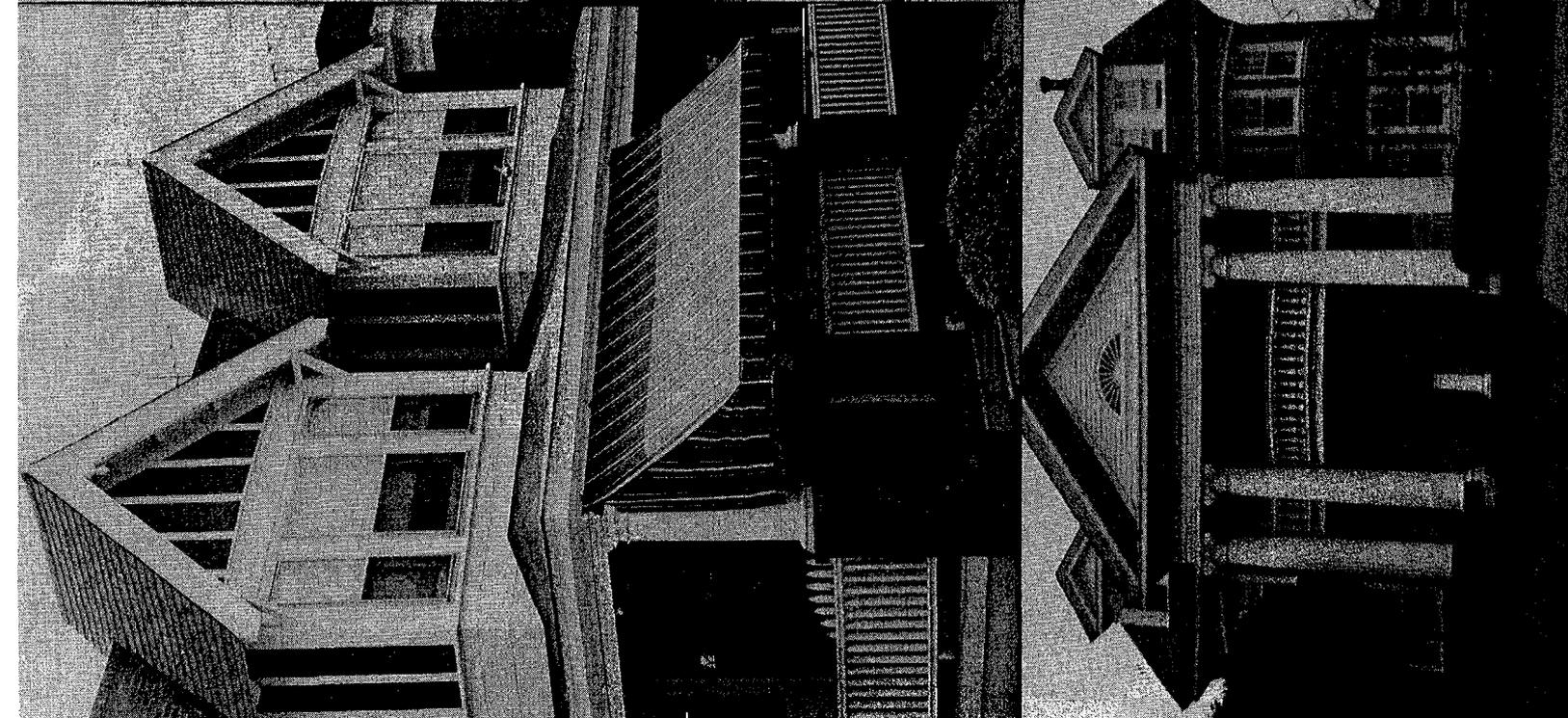
PROPORTION AND DETAIL

The principles of facade preservation and design apply to houses - whether they be mansions or rowhouses. Proper maintenance is a basic ingredient of preservation. It can have a dramatic effect. The following considerations are particularly important to homeowners.

Look for and treasure the original design features of your building. The shutters, the form and proportions of the windows, the decorative railings and fencing, the porch trim, the original doors and other building details are valuable and should be repaired or replaced. If your building has been extensively altered, look at the rest of the block for design clues about your building. Residential houses were often built in groups and have similar design characteristics within each group.

BEFORE





PRESERVATION DO'S AND DON'TS

DO Maintain original or early components of the building facade, including cornices, windows, doors, bay windows, porches, storefronts and trim.

Maintain the original size, shape and proportions of a building; where additions are necessary, locate them to rear areas.

Retain the locations, proportions and detail of original doors and windows. If the original facade has been altered, install new windows compatible with the scale and proportions of the building and its neighbors.

Maintain and repair original siding, roofing and wall materials by patching, painting, repointing, etc. Where necessary, replace with material similar to the existing.

Clean masonry surfaces with mild techniques such as water and soft bristle brushes, suitable detergents or steam cleaning. Scrape and repaint wood surfaces as needed.

Maintain joint materials and repair as necessary (mortar, caulking, flashing, etc.) to insure weatherproofing and stability.

Use flexible pointing and mortar mixes designed for compatibility with early brick and stone.

Investigate original paint colors and duplicate if possible. Use colors from appropriate period.

Remove large, inappropriate signs and replace with signs scaled to the pedestrian. Use wood and other appropriate materials and avoid contemporary materials such as plastic or neon.

DON'T Don't demolish, alter or obscure significant original components of a building facade, such as cornices, windows and doors, bay windows, porches, storefronts and trim.

Don't add to or eliminate original stories of a building, or alter roof forms, particularly in areas exposed to public views.

Don't add to or alter window or door openings, particularly in original facades.

Don't cover original siding, roofing or wall materials with modern or inappropriate sidings.

Don't sandblast stone, wood or brick surfaces under any conditions.

Don't chemically treat or seal stone, brick or wood surfaces without first obtaining expert advice on the ramifications.

Don't use hard Portland cement mortars; they do not expand and contract with the surrounding masonry.

Don't use contemporary paint colors on original facades.

Don't obscure significant building features with oversized or improperly placed signs and lighting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Norristown Design Guide was originally published in 1980. It resulted from the combined efforts of the Norristown Borough Planning Department, organizations of architects, historians, business people, and residents.

In the ten years since the original publication, two districts have been designated Historic Districts and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places¹, and many restorations have been and are being undertaken². The Norristown Preservation Society is proud of its role and is pleased to bring to you this updated version of the Norristown Design Guide.

We hope that efforts in this next decade will bring about the full revitalization of Norristown. Please join in making Norristown a fine place to live and work.

Norristown Preservation Society
Box 2097, Norristown: 19404



1. The Central Norristown Historic District contains over 1900 structures within approximately 40 square blocks, the West End Historic District is a predominately residential area of approximately 1700 structures, within 32 square blocks.

2. Schneidt's Brewery into the Stony Creek Office Center, OddFellows Hall into medical offices, Cigar Factory into loft apartments, Masonic Hall into office space, and YWCA into offices are some of the restorations completed.