West Main Street
Preservation District

A Brief History

National Recognition
During the 1970s, West Main Street was designated a local and a national historic district, in recognition of its importance to Louisville's economic development and the quality of its architecture. The district contains a significant concentration of nineteenth-century, cast-iron commercial buildings, rivaled only by such cities as New York and Portland, Oregon.

From Fortified Settlement To Commercial Hub
In 1779, settlers laid out the town of Louisville, Kentucky County, Virginia, with lots lining either side of Main Street between Third and Twelfth Streets. Fort Nelson, built to protect the settlement, was constructed along this street. Although West Main originally contained both residential and commercial architecture, it had become almost exclusively commercial by the 1830s. During the mid-nineteenth century, it became the commercial heart of the city.

Serving Travelers and Traders
Gradually a succession of hotels, restaurants, stores, warehouses, and banks grew up along West Main Street, serving travelers and the trade industry. Log and frame buildings slowly gave way to more permanent, and impressive, brick structures. Today, only a few buildings survive from that era, including Actors Theatre and the former St. Charles Hotel—over the years, many early buildings have been lost to fires and natural disasters.

Post-War Growth
The post-Civil War economic boom launched Louisville into the industrial age. Heavy commercial growth resulted in a building frenzy, with entrepreneurs scrambling to expand their operations by adding onto their facilities or building new ones. Much of the architecture seen within the West Main district dates to the era between the Civil War and the turn of the century. In addition to representing a staggering range of architectural styles, these buildings are examples of a revolutionary, Victorian-era building technology—cast-iron construction.

Courtesy of the University of Louisville Photographic Archives

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Marvels of Cast Iron

Cast-iron components were well suited to the eclectic designs favored during the late nineteenth century. Architects and builders had the option of selecting and combining a variety styles. Cast iron offered many advantages over masonry construction. Mass-produced, cast iron was less expensive to work than stone, which had to be quarried, cut, and laid up. The casting process also enabled complex patterns of ornament to be incorporated into building components with relative ease and at a minimal cost.

No Architect Needed

Lighter and stronger than masonry, cast iron took up less wall space, permitting the insertion of much larger windows than had previously been possible. Larger windows created better interior lighting—a plus during the pre-electricity era. Lastly, owners wishing to build an elaborate cast-iron structure did not automatically need to hire an architect. Although as a result, columns in a few structures are known to have been installed upside down. Merchants and wholesalers had the freedom to select what they needed from catalogues, since the individual cast-iron elements were cast in molds at the foundry, shipped, and then assembled at the construction site. Owners only needed to team up with a knowledgeable builder who could complete the on-site work. Buildings of this period that did not use cast iron were generally constructed of brick, with facades of masonry such as limestone, brick, and terra cotta.

Business Relocation

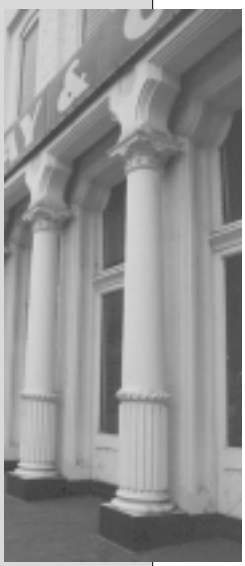
As Louisville entered the twentieth century, West Main Street began a period of decline. Businesses moved southward toward Broadway and Fourth Street. The development of manufacturing centers in the suburbs during the 1940s and 1950s also drained business from the downtown.

Urban Redevelopment

In the late 1960s, urban renewal efforts focused on the riverfront and began the movement to rebuild the use and appearance of Louisville's central business district. In subsequent years, as an outgrowth of these efforts, developers and investors renovated and adapted many important buildings to alternative uses. One example is the conversion of the headquarters of the wholesaler Carter Dry Goods Company into the Louisville Science Center. Other renovated structures include the Hart Block, the Harbison-Gathright Building, and the former Seelbach European Hotel.

Did You Know?

- The city's best example of cast-iron architecture stands at 726-730 West Main Street. Louisville architect Charles D. Meyer designed the building in 1884 for the Hart Hardware Company.
- Built in 1837, the Actors Theatre at 322 West Main Street is one of the oldest buildings in the city.
- A marker at Sixth and Main Streets memorializes Fort Nelson, built circa 1781.
- West Main Street has survived two fires, one in 1886 and one in 1889, a tornado in 1890, and floods in 1882, 1883, 1884, and 1937.
- West Main Street was the first street in the city.
- The first businesses to line West Main Street included an attorney, grocer, boardinghouse, auctioneer, merchant, carpenter, tailor, shoemaker, tobacco inspector, blacksmith, engineer, physician, hatter, tallow chandler, barber, painter, upholsterer, insurance company, plasterer, druggist, and brewer.
- John B. Ford of the New Albany Plate Glass Company invented the technique for rolling the expanses of window glass used in cast-iron architecture.



"Reading" Your Building— A Crash Course

Property owners planning to make exterior changes to a historic building should start by identifying the features and materials that give their structure its unique character, as well as its historic and non-historic elements. By taking the time to recognize and understand significant features, you will be much more likely to plan a project that is compatible with the original style of the building.

If, after looking over these guidelines, you would still like more information, the staff will be happy to arrange a pre-application meeting. Staff members can provide additional advice on the character of your building and how it relates to your upcoming project.

Learning to read a building and identify its significant elements is not complicated. Begin by thinking about and answering the questions below.

Step One

Identify the overall visual aspects of a building. Do not focus on the details, but on the setting and architectural context. Begin by working through the checklist below.

SHAPE

What is there about the form or shape of the building that gives the building its identity? Is it short and squat, or tall and narrow?

ROOF AND ROOF FEATURES

How does the roof shape or pitch contribute to the building's character? Are there unique features like weathervanes, cresting, or cupolas?

OPENINGS

What rhythm or pattern does the arrangement of window or door openings create? Are there unusually-shaped window openings or distinctive entryways?

PROJECTIONS

Are there parts of the building that are character-defining because they project from the walls of the building like porches, cornices, bay windows, or balconies? Are there turrets, or widely overhanging eaves, projecting pediments, or chimneys?

TRIM AND SECONDARY FEATURES

How does window and door trim contribute to the character of the building? Be sure to consider the decoration, color, or patterning of the trim. What about secondary features like shutters, decorative gables, and railings?

MATERIALS

From a distance, what contribution do the color, texture, and combination of exterior materials make to the overall character of the building?

SETTING

What aspects of the setting are important in establishing the visual character of the site? Think about the building's setback, alignment with adjacent buildings, plantings, fencing, terracing, and outbuildings, and its relationship to the street and alley.

Step Two

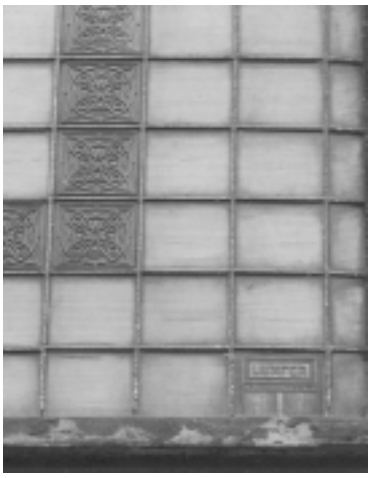
Identify the character of the building at close range. Assess the color and texture of the building materials as they convey the craftsmanship and age that gives the building its unique appearance. Begin by working through the checklist below.

MATERIALS AT CLOSE INSPECTION

Are there one or more materials that have an inherent texture that contribute to the close-range character, such as stucco, exposed aggregate concrete, or brick textured with vertical grooves?

CRAFT DETAILS

Is there high-quality brickwork with narrow mortar joints, or hand-tooled or patterned stonework? Are there hand-split or hand-dressed clapboards or machine-smoothed beveled siding? Craft details, whether handmade or machine-made, contribute to the character of a building because they are manifestations of the time in which the work was done and of the tools and processes that were used.



West Main Street—From Warehouses to Galleries

Evolving Uses

The West Main Preservation District has undergone many changes over the past two hundred years. In the 1830s, a large number of lodging establishments and taverns serving canal travelers sprang up. West Main Street later became an important transfer point for goods in the 1850s after the introduction of rail lines into the district encouraged the construction of numerous warehouses. The district's commercial success continued through the turn of the century, but investment then shifted to other municipal sectors. Many buildings were left abandoned or underutilized until renewal efforts began in the 1970s. Today, the historic warehouses along West Main Street have regained a high degree of occupancy, housing a mix of professional offices, galleries, cultural centers, and retail enterprises.

Circulation Patterns

West Main Street runs east-west along the level topography of the Ohio River floodplain and is part of the urban grid. Rear alleys are a secondary system of circulation with the potential to support the development of rear-facade-oriented uses in the West Main Street area. Within the district, buildings extend out to the property lines, creating a continuous architectural wall along the street. Most structures average between four and six stories in height, and storefronts and generous sidewalks provide a pedestrian-friendly, human scale.

Streetscape Elements

The district contains a limited number of projecting signs and awnings, with most business identification presented on wall signs or storefront windows. Parking garages and metered on-street parking serve the district, and numerous streetscape improvements have recently been implemented. Now such elements as street trees, benches, reproduction lighting standards, and public sculpture enhance the streetscape and testify to the city's commitment to investment within the district.

Cast-Iron Construction

No early nineteenth-century buildings have survived within the West Main Street Preservation District. All have been lost to fire, demolition, or natural forces like floods and tornadoes. A few buildings date to the early 1850s era of cast iron; however, business owners built the majority of structures between the 1880s and 1900. Although one of the strongest unifying elements within the West Main Street district is the use of cast iron in the front facades, there is great ornamental variety within the district. Each block contains buildings exhibiting a range of distinctive personalities–bold, demure, elegant, and boisterous are all present on West Main Street.

Abundance of Ornament

Nineteenth-century owners worked with builders to mix and match architectural elements for a custom look, either fanciful or restrained. Interchangeable cast-iron elements turned many utilitarian warehouses into commercial palaces. Today, the applied ornament of carved stone, terra cotta, and cast iron still conveys its original individualistic exuberance. Much of the architectural ornament within the district is in the Italianate, Renaissance Revival, and Beaux-Arts styles. Builders and architects incorporated detail at all levels of the facade, lavishing it on storefronts, window surrounds, quoins along wall faces, and highly decorative cornice treatments. Use of ornament often emphasizes tripartite facade arrangements.

Facade Organization

Some buildings employ cast-iron storefronts that support masonry bearing walls above (brick or limestone), while other facades are totally cast of iron. Use of the cast-iron support system enabled builders to have much more window space than was previously possible. Windows, along with storefronts, play a major role in establishing a facade's character. The organization of a building into bays emphasizes its verticality and regularity, since the bay width is narrow compared with the overall height of a building. Shed roofs are standard and often concealed from street view by decorative cornices. Overall, the buildings in the West Main Street Preservation District are industrial in the regularity of their form, but adopt elements of organic and naturalistic ornament that add substantially to their character.

Character-Defining Features

Urban Design

- principles and guidelines of the Downtown Development Review Overlay "Main-Market" District apply to West Main Street.

Site

- is part of the urban grid;
- has a cohesiveness achieved by consistent build-out of the lots; and
- is unified through shared streetscape-level features, such as storefronts, street trees, and street furniture.

Windows

- are generally one-over-one or two-over-two, wood, double-hung sash;
- are given prominence by ornamental sills, lintels, hoods, and moldings; and
- comprise a large part of front facades, providing an overall sense of translucence.

Storefronts

- have a tripartite organization of bulkheads, plate-glass windows, and transom;
- are generally unified under a decorative cornice, often with a signboard; and
- help maintain a pedestrian-scaled streetscape.

Applied Ornament

- distinguishes a variety of facade elements– storefronts, walls, and cornices;
- uses features such as delicate rosettes and robust brackets to add dynamism; and
- embraces a variety of materials including carved stone, terra cotta, and cast iron.

Courtesy of the University of Louisville Photographic Archives

Cornices

- give closure to the upper portion of the facade;
- establish relationships among buildings on a given block; and
- provide an area for a decorative statement—conservative or flamboyant.

Rear Facades

- front onto alleys, the district's secondary circulation network;
- have much simpler ornamentation; and
- often include secondary entrances and windows that have future development potential.

Streetscape

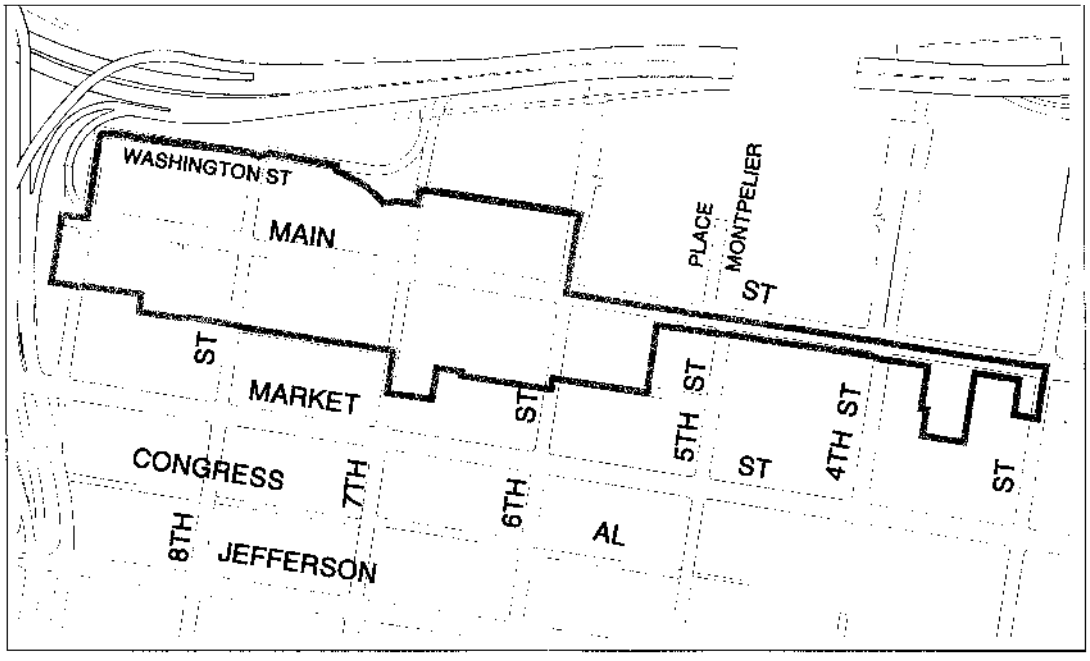
- improvements in the public-right-of-way are governed by the West Main Street Cultural Arts District Urban Design Plan.

HARDWARE

STOREFRONT

LIMESTONE AND CAST-IRON PIER

INCISED ORNAMENT



West Main Street Preservation District

Cornice

Window

Rear Facade

Signs

Site

Courtesy of the University of Louisville Photographic Archives

Preservation Principles

Outlined below are a number of guiding preservation principles that are modeled after the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Reading through these principles will help you begin to think about how you can carry out your upcoming project in a way that both enhances your historic building or site and preserves its character-defining features.

Relationships
When evaluating the appropriateness of a given project, the structure, the site, and their relationship to the rest of the district should be given careful consideration.

Use
Historic structures within a local preservation district should be used for their originally intended purpose or for an alternate purpose that requires minimal alteration to the building and site.

Alterations
Repair is always preferred over replacement. When replacement is necessary, materials should replicate or match the visual appearance of the original.

A high level of craftsmanship distinguishes structures within local preservation districts. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques should be preserved whenever possible.

Removal or alteration of historic fabric compromises the original character of a building or site and should be avoided.

Properties, however, do change over time. Those alterations that have become historic in their own right should be maintained as a record of a resource's physical evolution.

New Construction and Additions
Additions should be designed to minimize impact to historic fabric and should be compatible with the main structure in massing, size, and scale.

New, infill construction should be designed so that it is compatible with its neighbors in size, massing, scale, setback, facade organization, and roof form.

New construction and additions should also draw upon established stylistic elements to create a sympathetic design that is clearly of its own era.

Archeology
Historic sites often contain archeological resources, which should be protected and preserved whenever possible. If artifacts are found, contact the Landmarks Commission for an assessment.