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**ADMINISTRATIVE GUIDELINES FOR ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW**

**City of Rochester Hills**

Approved by Planning Commission:

Jan. 18, 1994  
Date

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# **ADMINISTRATIVE GUIDELINES FOR ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW**

## **City of Rochester Hills**

### **Objectives**

The purpose of this architectural review process is to improve the quality of architectural design in the City of Rochester Hills and to achieve a higher degree of aesthetic compatibility between buildings and their surroundings. Under these guidelines, a proposed architectural design will be evaluated to determine whether it is compatible with the overall prevailing architectural styles and designs in the surrounding area. The design will also be evaluated to determine if it exhibits good basic architectural design characteristics.

### **Legal and Historic Precedents for Architectural Review**

In the landmark U.S. Supreme Court Decision, *Berman V Parker* (348 US 26, 1954), the court held that aesthetics was a valid reason to support actions taken for the public welfare. The court ruled that it was within the purview of planning and zoning to not only require that a community be economically viable but that it also be aesthetically pleasing. Subsequent to *Berman V Parker*, cities throughout the United States initiated aesthetic design standards in urban renewal projects and in special project areas such as downtown development authorities, tax increment finance authorities, lakefront development districts, and other special planning areas where aesthetics was important.\* Michigan State Zoning Law specifically enables Planning Commissions to review the appropriateness of building designs with respect to the public health, safety, and welfare. Inclusion of architectural review within the interpretation of the public welfare provides a legal basis for architectural review.

\*See essay on aesthetic control in the Appendix to this report.

## **Types of Buildings Covered by Architectural Review**

This architectural review process will cover commercial, office, manufacturing, institutional buildings, multiple-family residential complexes, and related signage. It will not include single-family residential construction.

## **Designated Area for Architectural Review**

The architectural review process will cover the entire City of Rochester Hills.

## **Responsibility for the Architectural Review Process**

Site plans which are submitted to the city for approval are normally reviewed by the Planning Commission. These site plans will also undergo an architectural review process as an integral part of the overall site plan review and approval process.

## **Professional Review**

The Planning Commission will review building designs and make recommendations to the applicant where modifications are recommended. Complex or larger designs may be referred to the city's planning consultant for more detailed review as required. The City of Rochester Hills has the technical capability to do video imaging in which a computer is used to graphically portray various design changes to a drawing of a building. This approach could be effectively used for major architectural projects.

## **Pre-Submission Conferences**

The applicants will meet with the Planning Department before submission of building designs to the city. A pre-submission conference will be used to communicate acceptable standards of architectural design to the applicant. The planning staff will discuss the criteria for architectural review contained in this report with the applicant and his or her architect. Emphasis will be placed on the use of quality building materials to achieve good aesthetic results.

## **Architectural Submission Requirements**

Applicants for site plan approval for new construction will follow the normal submission requirements contained in the zoning ordinance.

## **SURVEY OF EXISTING ARCHITECTURAL STYLES AND ISSUES**

The photographic examples in this survey were very carefully selected to portray specific problems and issues involving architectural aesthetics in Rochester Hills. Many of the examples are typical of problems which occur throughout the city. Several examples cited actually portray examples of good architectural design. It is a generally accepted premise of urban planning research that a survey of existing conditions is usually performed to establish the need or rationale for a recommended new planning or regulatory approach. The photographic survey contained in this section is designed to meet this objective. Examination of the photographic examples clearly shows that there is a need to more carefully review the architectural design process in the City of Rochester Hills.



**Figure 1**

Rochester Hills has a very small number of structures of historic architectural quality. Some historic residential structures are located in business districts and have been adapted for commercial uses. These structures should be carefully preserved and care should be taken so that new buildings placed near historic structures do not clash with their aesthetic appearance.



**Figure 2**

Many commercial buildings in Rochester Hills are pleasing adaptations of the "Williamsburg Colonial" or Georgian style of architecture. When such a style has been established in a section of the city, new buildings and remodeled buildings should be encouraged to follow the same style.





**Figure 3**

Some existing shopping centers in Rochester Hills will be undergoing redevelopment and remodeling in the near future. This presents a unique opportunity to improve the overall design quality of these shopping areas. The Planning Commission should use the architectural review process described in this report to work with shopping center designers to achieve a higher quality of design result.



**Figure 4**

The quality of commercial architecture in Rochester Hills varies widely. The top example is a gas station designed in a modified colonial Williamsburg design. The second example is a contemporary car wash design.



**Figure 5**

A large number of commercial structures in Rochester Hills are simply "utilitarian" in design. They portray no particular architectural style or qualities; they are simply functional containers which house a particular business. A planning commission can work with the developer of a utilitarian building to infuse more style and aesthetic quality into a proposed design.



**Figure 6**

Generally, the designers of shopping centers in Rochester Hills have been very conservative, middle-of-the-road. There has been little attempt to introduce creativity or originality to commercial shopping areas. The need to contain costs is one reason for the appearance of some of the city's existing centers.



**Figure 7**

The Planning Commission needs to work with designers of residential condominiums to achieve less blandness and sameness in design. Condominiums should have more spirited, more inspired design concepts. During recent years, the quality of condominium design in the city has improved over earlier examples.



**Figure 8**

Rochester Hills exhibits some of the best industrial architectural design in Oakland County. Well-designed industrial buildings can be seen in planned industrial parks as well as in free-standing industrial buildings.



**Figure 9**

The Rochester Hills municipal government has appropriately set the standard for good architectural design in the community by the design of its own municipal headquarters. This award-winning design by William Kessler and Associates is a magnificent structure which is sensitively and uniquely integrated with its natural woodland setting.

## ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW GUIDELINES

The design of buildings in Rochester Hills should respect the scale and design of surrounding existing architecture, and should exhibit the basic qualities of good architectural design. The architectural review process should give consideration to the following:

1. Stylistic Compatibility
2. Scale
3. Rooflines
4. Rhythm of Solids and Voids
5. Proportions of Openings
6. Facade Materials
7. Mechanical Equipment
8. Superficial Design Elements
9. Bizarre Angles
10. Signage
11. Landscaping
12. Site Elements

The following principles of architectural design are set forth for use in evaluating the aesthetic features of building design:

1. Stylistic Compatibility

Building designs should be stylistically compatible with the style of surrounding or nearby architecture. Architectural designs in special districts should conform to the building design stylistic theme established for the area. It is not always necessary for styles to be identical to be compatible. A Georgian-style building and a contemporary building could be compatible if they are of similar scale, proportions, and building materials.

2. Scale

A sense of scale directly relating to the surrounding neighborhood should be provided. The scale of a building depends on its overall size, the mass of it in relationship to the open space around it, and the sizes of its doors, windows, porches and balconies. The scale gives



a building "presence;" that is, it makes it seem big or small, awkward or graceful, overpowering or unimportant. The scale of a building should be visually compatible with its site and with surrounding neighborhood.

3. Rooflines

Cluttering of rooflines as a result of too many different angles and roof pitches should be avoided. A roof can have a dramatic impact on the appearance of a building. The shape and proportion of the roof should be visually compatible with the architectural style of the building and with those of neighboring buildings. Commercial building facades should not exhibit roof elements which are visually out of proportion with the other building design elements. Fake mansard roofs and other unattractive roof designs should be avoided.

4. Rhythm of Solids and Voids

The rhythm of solids to voids in front facades should be well-designed. When you look at any facade of a building, you see openings such as doors or windows (voids) in the wall surface (solid). Usually the voids appear as dark areas, almost holes, in the solid and they are quite noticeable, setting up a pattern or rhythm. The pattern of solids and voids in the front facade of a new or altered building should be visually compatible with that of neighboring architecture.

5. Proportions of Openings

The proportions of openings within the building should be compatible with the overall design. Windows and doors come in a variety of shapes and sizes; even rectangular window and door openings can appear quite different depending on their dimensions. The relationship of the height of windows and doors to their width should be visually compatible with the architectural style of the building and with that of neighboring architecture.

## 6. Facade Materials

The relationship of facade materials is important to the design integrity of a building. The facades of a building are what give it character, and the character varies depending on the materials of which the facades are made and their texture. In Rochester Hills, many different materials are used on facades - depending on the architectural style of the building. The facade of a building, particularly the front facade, should be visually compatible with those of other buildings around it. Building materials should be chosen carefully, and it is generally more desirable to use as few differing materials as possible.

## 7. Mechanical Equipment

Mechanical equipment, such as air conditioners, vents, metal chimneys, and electrical systems should be screened from view; or they should be integrated into the overall design of the building. They should not be visible on the roof of a structure.

## 8. Superficial Design Elements

Superficial stylistic elements or themes such as "Mexican," "Colonial," or "Alpine" should be avoided unless they are fully developed as an integral part of the total architectural concept of the building. A colonial cupola "pasted on top" of a contemporary store front, or a fake tile roof on a California spanish-style building are examples of "superficial stylistic elements."

## 9. Bizarre Angles

Bizarre looking architectural angles and contours should be avoided on commercial buildings. Examples would include unusual window or door frame shapes or awkward contours or facade panels.

## 10. Signage

Signage should be coordinated and compatible with buildings in the surrounding neighborhood. Size, lettering style, color, materials, lighting, and placement all affect the aesthetic quality of signage.

11. Landscaping

Landscaping should be used to enhance architectural design and to either strengthen or buffer the visual relationship with surrounding architecture.

12. Site Elements

The size, placement, and materials of walls, fences, driveways, and parking areas have a visual impact on a building. These features should be visually compatible with the building and neighboring buildings.

## Appendix

### *Aesthetics*

In the context of zoning regulations, *aesthetics* has usually meant controls over architectural design, the external appearance or shape of a building. No such purpose or objective was included in the purposes section of the early state enabling legislation at a time when such phrases as "avoidance of congestion in the streets" and "preservation of light and air" were representative of the public goals zoning was intended to advance. Except in such famous historical areas as the French Quarter in New Orleans and Beacon Hill in Boston, few cities sought to use the police power to impose design controls. *Aesthetics* was often a pejorative charge against various zoning regulations when a landowner wanted to protest a restriction and was hard put to find some other basis for attacking the offending regulation. To try to sustain a zoning regulation solely on the basis of aesthetics would have been a bold venture. Few courts in the early decades of zoning would have subscribed to Chief Judge Pound's dictum: "Beauty may not be queen but she is not an outcast beyond the pale of protection or respect. She may at least shelter herself under the wing of safety, morality or decency."<sup>16</sup> For the most part, the courts in the early and middle epochs of zoning developed a common response to such allegations: the fact that there might be aesthetic considerations behind the regulation did not render it invalid if there were other less dubious public purposes that would be furthered by the regulation.

For many years everyone concerned with defending zoning shied away from aesthetic considerations which is why, for example, a variety of implausible fictions were concocted to justify the severe regulation of billboards when everyone knew the real motive was that they were regarded as aesthetically distasteful.

Only in the past decade have some courts ventured to justify regulation solely on the basis of aesthetics. In one delightful case the New York Court of Appeals held that an ordinance prohibiting the hanging of washing in front yards was a valid regulation and based its decision on the conviction that the ordinance did no more than regulate that which "offends the sensibilities of the average man."<sup>17</sup>

Courts in other states have upheld architectural review boards which prohibited A-frame houses in a subdivision of ranch style houses and which subjected housing projects to review for exterior colors and roof styles. Even where there is no clear authority for such architectural review such regulations flourish, and for a very good reason: only the most obstreperous of builders or landowners want to spend the time and money to litigate an issue of design. If the municipality stands firm the applicant will usually accede to the design requirements even though the applicant suspects there is no lawful basis for the regulation. That is known as municipal leverage.

Architectural controls are widespread even among suburbs not known for their sensitivity to imaginative design. The same ordinance that mandates that all shops in the business district look like Tudor England may also require that every house in a residential block vary in some aspect of its design from other houses in the same block. These "look-alike" and "no-look-alike" ordinances may come in for their knocks from commentators, but they flourish.

A more serious aspect of aesthetics arises in our larger cities where nostalgia and a desire to preserve some evidence of our past have spread west across the Alleghenies and north up the Mississippi. No longer are efforts to protect a physical record of our urban past limited to late eighteenth century enclaves. Today, early twentieth century areas of Rochester, New York, and late nineteenth century blocks in Chicago are designated as subject to architectural review, which serves to remind us that time alone may turn the ordinary into the special, particularly if we have bulldozed most of the remnants of those earlier eras.

These special architectural districts are usually under the domain of a special review board which operates independently of the local planning commission. These boards are often (and with reason) made up of residents of the special area, which leads some developers to protest that the judge is also the prosecutor. It might be more equitable to treat such boards as advocates for a point of view and to provide that the plan commission or the city council finally balance the competing interests of developer and historical area protagonists.